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Mission and cultural change : a critical engagement with the writings of Lesslie Newbigin

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*Mission and Cultural Change:
A Critical Engagement with the Writings of
Lesslie Newbigin*

by

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Abstract

The thesis is an exploration and assessment of the missiological writings of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin following his return to Britain in 1974.

It begins by setting out the context of his subsequent work as being one of cultural transition from modernity to postmodernity, and draws missiological implications from this evolution. Against this background, it is the original thrust of this thesis that the work of Michael Polanyi provides the indispensable hermeneutical key with which to unlock Newbigin's thinking, both in its philosophical and missiological dimensions. The contours of this indebtedness are explored in detail, and the implications for Newbigin's work in the context of both modernity and postmodernity are examined. Polanyi's thought is shown to contribute positive and constructive elements to Newbigin's work, enabling him to engage with the need for cultural renewal upon fresh epistemological grounds, to challenge modernity's preoccupation with 'reason' as the only grounds for certainty, and to recall the Church to a renewed confidence in the gospel by emphasising its fiduciary foundations. Moreover, Polanyi's influence is also shown to strengthen Newbigin's credentials as a 'postmodern' missiologist.

The thesis proceeds to argue that Polanyi's influence also provides the key to understanding Newbigin's philosophical and missiological shortcomings. Two of these are developed in detail. Firstly, the importation of Polanyi's liberal-existential approach to epistemological method is shown to work against Newbigin's more robust revelational methodology. Secondly, Polanyi's influence is shown to contribute to Newbigin's ultimately confusing exposition of his programme of 'public' truth. The thesis critiques this element of Newbigin's

programme and shows that it founders upon the importation of a secular Polanyian notion of ‘dogma’ into Newbigin’s overtly theological and missiological framework.

The thesis concludes by assessing Newbigin’s contribution to cultural critique and mission and suggests lines of enquiry in the light of his work.

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Introduction

Newbigin, Mission, and Cultural Change

The question of how contemporary Christians should seek to propagate a religious message in a culture that knows no obvious conceptual starting point for one is an issue of pressing significance for the Church. The speed of cultural change in the West, which has heralded an era now increasingly characterised by the adjective ‘*post-modern*’, simply serves to raise this missiological question in new and sometimes unexpected forms. How, for example, may a message which is believed to contain certain unchanging and unchangeable truths about God and his world, be communicated when the setting in which such communication takes place is characterised by an increasing pluralism and relativism? Or how may Christians presume to proclaim that the gospel in which they believe is ‘true’ when what appears to characterise ‘postmodern’ society is a new form of ‘truism’ – summed up by John Caputo in his 1987 book *Radical Hermeneutics* with the words, ‘The truth is that there is no truth’?¹

Has the Church to face the fact that it now operates in a wholly different cultural and philosophical context to the one occupied under ‘modernity’, and therefore must forfeit any supposed claims to notions of ‘truth’ in the ideological market-place? Have Christians to reject altogether any associations with the language and discourse of ‘metanarrative’, and settle for an altogether more

¹ Caputo 1987: 156. The ‘absolute’ nature of the truth claim being made by Caputo in this statement is, of course, glaringly contradictory under postmodern assumptions.

modest mode of discourse? Or may there still exist some form of valid presuppositional base from which they may continue to stand for ‘Truth’?

In order to explore these questions, the writings of the late Bishop Lesslie Newbigin will provide the basis for analysis and discussion. We shall concentrate upon those writings published since Newbigin’s return to England from missionary service in India in 1974, as these relate most directly to the theme, and have not been given the kind of sustained treatment that has been recently given to his earlier writings.² The reasons for examining the work of Newbigin in particular are threefold.

(i) *Newbigin and the debate about ‘post-Enlightenment’ mission in the West*

The first is Newbigin’s unique contribution to the development of a specifically ‘missionary’ theology for an increasingly secularised, post-Enlightenment West. Even without this, his position within Christendom would already be assured, largely as a result of his impact on the formation of the ecumenical Church of South India (in which he served as a founding bishop), and also because of his influence on the development of the International Missionary

² Hunsberger’s recent major study of Newbigin (Hunsberger 1998a) concentrates upon Newbigin’s pre-1986 material, and does not deal with the texts that are directly pertinent to our theme. His stated aim is not to address the ‘Gospel and Western Culture’ material directly, but to write ‘about the theology of cultural plurality that lies beneath it and must continue to inform and guide it. It is a book about what is behind those first ten pages in Newbigin’s *Foolishness to the Greeks*’ (6). Later, he writes: ‘In all of this, the accent will be upon materials written prior to Newbigin’s major works on the encounter with Western culture, showing the ground from which that encounter arises and the framework within which it is engaged’ (44). In the light of this, Kirk’s comment (1999: 271) that Hunsberger’s book is a ‘weighty, comprehensive and sympathetic interpretation of Newbigin’s mission engagement *with contemporary culture*’ (emphasis added) is misplaced. Wainwright’s recent major work (Wainwright 2000) begins to redress the balance, but deals with Newbigin’s later writings in the context of his life as a whole, and is not a systematic treatment as such. His views also differ from those presented in this thesis in the sense that he gives comparatively little space and no sustained analysis to the influence of Polanyi on Newbigin’s thought.

Council and its re-constitution as the World Council of Churches.³ Putting together these different strands of his life work, the *Times* obituary described him as ‘one of the foremost missionary statesmen of his generation’, and ‘one of the outstanding figures on the world Christian stage in the second half of the century.’⁴ In a similar vein, the Fuller Seminary missiologist Wilbert Shenk describes him as ‘one of the outstanding Christian leaders of the twentieth century’.⁵ Recently – and in the most august terms – Geoffrey Wainwright has likened him to one of the ‘Fathers of the Church’,⁶ and has sought to draw out ‘the similarities and continuities’ between Newbigin ‘and the great bishop-theologians in early ecclesiastical history’.⁷

But it is in the context of the debate about what he came to describe as the pressing need for a ‘mission to modern Western culture’,⁸ that Newbigin’s particular contribution has been made over the last twenty-five years. On his return from India, he swiftly came to the realisation that, ‘England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough

³ Newbigin worked as a missionary in India from 1936 and became one of the first Bishops of the Church of India serving the Diocese of Madura and Ramnad (1947-59). In 1959 he became Secretary of the International Missionary Council (1959-1961) leading up to its integration into the World Council of Churches, an organisation with which he worked in Geneva (1961-1965). During this time he was Editor of the *International Review of Mission*. He returned to India in 1965 for a second term as Bishop (this time of Madras) until his ‘retirement’ in 1974. He came back to England in 1974 to teach at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham and later took up the post of Presbyterian minister in the United Reformed Church in Winson Green, an Urban Priority Area in Birmingham. He became moderator of the URC in 1978-9. For his own account see the 2nd edition of his autobiography (Newbigin 1993g). For a briefer biography, cf. Yates 1994: 237-44. For a much fuller treatment see now: Wainwright 2000.

⁴ *The Times*, 31st January, 1998.

⁵ Shenk 2000: 59. This article is a revision of his earlier piece for the Bible Society’s tribute to Newbigin in its magazine, *The Bible in TransMission* (Shenk 1998).

⁶ Wainwright 2000: v.

⁷ Wainwright 2000: 390.

⁸ Cf. e.g., the title of Newbigin 1990i. His first use of such language is in 1983b: 31: ‘What I am pleading for is a genuinely missionary encounter with post-Enlightenment culture’; or, 1991b: 6: ‘We need a theological clarification of the issues involved in a global missionary encounter with modernity.’ For similar material, cf. also: 1986b: 1, 3, 15, 42, etc.; 1987a: 355.

form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church.’⁹ It was upon this project that the labours of Newbigin’s ‘retirement’ years were concentrated, and within this sphere there can have been few more powerful or influential thinkers – a fact made even more remarkable when one considers that all his writings in this area came from a man already seventy-four years old.

This process of reflection started formally in 1983 with the publication of *The Other Side of 1984*. It was published by the World Council of Churches and was subtitled ‘Questions for the Churches’.¹⁰ This short book, commissioned by the WCC as a preparatory document for a proposed conference for British Church leaders, was offered by Newbigin with some hesitation, and its subsequent impact greatly surprised him.¹¹ But the material contained in its seventy-five pages set out the essential framework for his subsequent work. Since then his published output has been considerable – as has been his wider impact on missionary thinking on both sides of the Atlantic – and further afield. It has seen the publication of nine books and over seventy articles specifically relating to the subject of mission in the West, and led directly to the foundation of the ‘Gospel and Our Culture’ network in Britain in 1984, whose aim was to begin to address the questions he was raising. His book, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Culture*,¹² was one of two reading texts recommended by the Church of England’s ‘Board of Mission’ in preparation for the ‘Decade of Evangelism’ in

⁹ Newbigin 1993g: 236.

¹⁰ For details of the circumstances which led to its publication, see Newbigin 1985c; also, 1992k: 22; 1993g: 250ff., and ‘A Note from the Author’ in 1983b: vii.

¹¹ He was ‘quite astonished at the volume and range of correspondence’ that ‘descended’ on him following its publication (Newbigin 1993g: 252).

¹² Newbigin 1989f.

the 1990s,¹³ whilst two regional conferences (jointly sponsored by the ‘Gospel and Our Culture’ movement and the Bible Society) followed in 1990 and 1991.¹⁴ These culminated in a ‘National Consultation’ at Swanwick in July 1992.¹⁵ Meanwhile, a ‘Gospel and Culture’ network similar to the one formed in Britain was founded in the United States under the leadership of George Hunsberger in 1988.¹⁶

Within the context of these developments, Newbigin’s influence may understandably be described as ‘pivotal’. From a North American perspective, for example, Hunsberger himself considers him to be a ‘potent catalyst for focusing our attention on what must become a primary agenda for Western churches.’¹⁷ But outside the more specific context of this movement, Newbigin’s significance has also been widely recognised. For example, Lamin Sanneh (a Gambian who is presently Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale), writes in his major 1993 study, *Encountering the West – Christianity and the Global Cultural Process*, that:

There is no doubt of the enormous influence of Newbigin and his significance for a cross cultural critique of the West. He has broken wide open the shell of Western cultural exclusiveness by insisting that from the religious point of view Western societies are to be confronted with the gospel no less relentlessly than

¹³ The other being Abraham 1989.

¹⁴ The first was held at High Leigh, Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire in October 1990 entitled ‘Mission to our culture in the light of Scripture and the Christian Tradition’. Newbigin’s plenary address at the conference was called ‘What is the Culture?’ (1990s). The second was held at Swanwick, Derbyshire in April 1991 and was entitled ‘Freedom and Truth in a Pluralist Society’. Newbigin’s contribution was called ‘Pluralism and the Church’ (1991c). For his reflections on the Swanwick conference see Newbigin 1992i.

¹⁵ Entitled ‘The Gospel as Public Truth’, it was convened as a result of the previous conferences. Cf. Newbigin’s ‘Conference Call’ for this gathering (1992b). A volume of essays was written partly in preparation for the discussions (Montefiore 1992).

¹⁶ For the background to the American movement, along with references to the wider network inspired by Newbigin’s writings, see Hunsberger 1998a: 4ff..

¹⁷ Hunsberger 1991: 393. See also Hunsberger and Van Gelder 1996, in which a number of North American scholars take up issues raised by Newbigin’s work.

Third World societies, the only difference being that the West may be a ‘darker continent’ for having reneged on its religious heritage.¹⁸

More recently, in a major study on mission, the Sri Lankan scholar Vinoth Ramachandra suggests dramatically that Newbigin’s, ‘galvanising summons to a slumbering, divided and tragically compromised church in the West invites comparison with the challenge of the early Barth’.¹⁹

There is little doubt then that Newbigin’s influence on missionary thinking in the West over the last twenty years has been of central importance. Sanneh sums up his impact in the following words:

With great force of intellect and moral courage, . . . Newbigin has forced upon the churches and upon Christians generally an issue they cannot now ignore even if they do not agree with the terms in which he frames the debate. An important intellectual ferment is going on in numerous circles on both sides of the Atlantic, thanks largely to his initiative and leadership.²⁰

(ii) *Newbigin and the ‘cross-cultural’ critique*

A second reason for choosing to concentrate on Newbigin’s work is that the perspective he brings is itself consciously informed by a cross-cultural analysis, and can therefore lay claim to an unusual degree of originality in the field of mission studies – particularly as they relate to the culture of the West. As Sanneh puts it: ‘Newbigin brings a comparative missionary perspective to bear on the situation in the West.’²¹ In this context, Hunsberger has shown how the

¹⁸ Sanneh 1993: 162-3.

¹⁹ Ramachandra 1996: 144.

²⁰ Sanneh 1993: 163-4.

²¹ Sanneh 1993: 163.

framework of what he calls Newbigin's 'Theology of Cultural Plurality'²² is built upon presuppositions that nuance the classic works of the likes of Richard Niebuhr,²³ and Paul Tillich.²⁴ Hunsberger argues that by taking the 'pluriform' nature of culture seriously – not least in its impact upon the Church itself – Newbigin's work as a whole displays a truly 'integrative force, bringing into intimate relationship discussions which have tended to remain too much in isolation from each other.'²⁵

The background to this 'inter-cultural' perspective arose inevitably out of Newbigin's own missionary experience in India which began in 1936. This forced him to face the issues which arose out of his concern to communicate the Christian gospel in a culture which was not his own. As he attempted to share the gospel with Hindus, his own inherited European assumptions were gradually thrown into sharp relief. As he put it: 'I often confused the gospel with my assumptions as a "modern" European.'²⁶ In corresponding fashion a similar process took place when Newbigin returned to Britain from India in the 1970s. More than a decade later, he was to write that:

Having spent most of my working life in India and then come back, I have discovered – in a way, to my own astonishment – that one faces the same problem here, and that one is again in a culture where, when you attempt to communicate the gospel, you are going completely against the stream.²⁷

Around the same time, he expressed a similar thought in the following words:

²² Cf. Hunsberger's discussion (Hunsberger 1998a: 3-44).

²³ Niebuhr 1952.

²⁴ Tillich 1959. Note Newbigin's references to these writers in: e.g., Newbigin 1986b: 1; 1987a: 356; 1993c: 99-100; 1995c: 145.

²⁵ Hunsberger 1998a: 277.

²⁶ Newbigin 1985c: 8. Cf. also: 1978a: 5; 1986b: 21; 1988e: 98-9; 1989g: 1-2; 1994b: 68; 1996b: 9.

²⁷ Newbigin 1988b: 30; also, 1983b: 5. See also the first two chapters of 1986b, where he explores this issue in more detail.

During the twelve years since I came back to England, and especially since I had a pastoral charge in Birmingham, I have come more and more to feel that England is as much a foreign mission field as India was for me in 1936.²⁸

This awareness of the cross-cultural dimension of missionary engagement lies at the heart of Newbigin's writings, and brings unique perspectives to bear upon the missionary issues facing the Church in the West. As a result, he writes at the outset of *Foolishness to the Greeks* that: 'The angle from which I am approaching the study is that of a foreign missionary.'²⁹ He goes on to speak of the 'succession of roles' he had occupied within his lifetime which had 'forced' him to ask the question posed as the theme of the book: 'What would be involved in a missionary encounter between the gospel and this whole way of perceiving, thinking, and living that we call "modern Western culture"?'³⁰

This perspective brings with it not only an awareness of the cross-cultural dimension to the particular task of missionary proclamation, but also an ability to articulate the 'ambivalent' nature of the Church's relationship with the wider culture of which it is a part – not least in an awareness of the invasive nature of culture's influence upon the Church itself as it seeks to 'incarnate' the gospel. The resulting 'critique' of the Church from the point of view of its potential accommodation to the prevailing assumptions of the surrounding culture had been an element of Newbigin's writings from early on, but it takes a much more central role in Newbigin's later missiology, as we will see.³¹ The fact that by the

²⁸ Newbigin 1988e: 99-100. For a similar sentiment, cf. 1980b: 154: 'After a lifetime spent in India I now struggle with the problem of communicating the gospel in the comfortable suburb of an English city.'

²⁹ Newbigin 1986b: 1.

³⁰ Newbigin 1986b: 1.

³¹ For his earlier material, cf. e.g., Newbigin 1953: 11-18; 1961: esp. 9-29, 106-26; 1963: 31-2; 1966: e.g., 103: 'the Church had become the religious department of European society rather than the task force selected and appointed for a world mission.'

mid-seventies his perspective had become largely attuned to a *non*-Western culture suggests that he is well-placed through long experience of such questions to analyse the challenges facing the Church in the West in the context of cultural crisis and transition.

(iii) *Newbigin and the challenge of cultural change*

A third reason for choosing to concentrate on Newbigin's work is that though the importance of his writing is sometimes perceived as relating entirely to the concerns of 'modernity' – an emphasis which might now be considered rather *passé*, the case will be made that his writing is thoroughly contemporary in its significance. There is no doubt that he wrote primarily with the challenges of 'modernity' as the focus of his attention – at least in terms of the diagnosis and critique that he articulated. But it is noteworthy that he did so with an acute consciousness that the culture that he was criticizing was now drawing to a close. His description of a missionary agenda is therefore written with a distinct view towards what might happen when the fuel of the Enlightenment programme was exhausted. In this respect, although his specific attention to the questions surrounding the onset of 'postmodernity' were less fully developed than his interaction with the challenges of 'modernity', it is important nonetheless to keep in mind that his vision is 'future-orientated'.

In addition, where he does begin in his later writings to address the issue of postmodernity more specifically, the method of his engagement does not differ in substance from that which he had employed in relation to modernity. This suggests a belief on his part that what he had been saying all along had relevance not only in the context of modernity, but also in the more contemporary

environment of *post*-modernity. As a consequence of these considerations, it is appropriate to raise the possibility that his approach – far from being *passé* – warrants serious attention on its own terms in a postmodern context.

The scope of the thesis

In the light of these perspectives, therefore, the thesis will seek to take a fresh look at Newbigin's work, and will argue that he cannot be dismissed simply as 'yesterday's man' so far as the significance of his thought to the contemporary Church is concerned. On the contrary, we shall argue that in some central aspects he both anticipates and begins to address some of the central missiological questions which have emerged in the wake of the contemporary transition into an increasingly postmodern era. It may be argued, therefore, that Newbigin is both peculiarly well-placed and uniquely equipped to analyse the contemporary challenges facing the Church in the West, and to provide a framework within which to explore some of the central features of contemporary missiological significance.

The thesis will begin in chapter 1 by setting out the agenda with which the Church must grapple if it is to address the questions raised by the cultural transition from modernity to postmodernity.

It proceeds in the first part of chapter 2 to outline Newbigin's diagnosis of Western culture. Then in the second part of chapter 2 – the central thrust of the thesis – it argues that it is Newbigin's renewed reading of Michael Polanyi's book *Personal Knowledge* which provides the hermeneutical 'key', not only to his diagnostic analysis of contemporary culture, but also to the conceptual and

pragmatic framework within which he approaches the themes of mission and cultural reconstruction.

On the basis of this analysis, and its implications for a renewed reading of Newbigin, chapters 3 and 4 explore the strengths and weaknesses of Newbigin's missionary programme in the context of contemporary cultural change. Chapter 3 offers an appraisal of his 'postmodern' contribution, whilst chapter 4 mounts a sustained critique of his proposals on methodological and missiological grounds.

Finally, chapter 5 draws conclusions from the foregoing analysis, and highlights the implications of the thesis as a whole – both for the study of Newbigin's thought, as well as for future missionary thinking.

Chapter One

The Cultural Challenge to Mission

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide the cultural and missiological framework within which the following analysis of Lesslie Newbigin's work will be undertaken. It will highlight some of the central features of the transition from modernity to postmodernity, and draw out the resulting challenges for the Church in its missionary calling. It will conclude by examining three possible theological responses to the changes taking place.

1.2 Questions of 'legitimacy' in modernity and postmodernity

By way of introduction we shall propose that at the heart of the contemporary challenge facing the Church as it seeks to reach an increasingly secularised and pluralistic society lies the question of 'legitimacy'. Since Christians believe that 'truth' has been uniquely revealed and made known in the person of Jesus Christ, and that such 'truth' must therefore be declared to others, upon what grounds may such claims be legitimated? This central question may be articulated in further supplementary ways. How, for example, in a pluralistic context can a claim to the uniqueness of such a revelation be sustained; and upon

what grounds can dialogue and apologetics take place with adherents of other views or faiths?

That these were central issues for Newbigin in his later writing is clear from the briefest of surveys. Not only is the question of ‘dialogue’ frequently at the forefront of his concerns,¹ but at the heart of his engagement with the culture of the West is precisely the contention that the idea of ‘truth’ both *can* and *must* be upheld. Accordingly he wrote in 1994:

Like others who have returned to the West after a lifetime as a foreign missionary, I am moved to ask, Who will be the missionaries to this culture? Who will confront this culture of ours with the claim of absolute truth, the claim that Jesus Christ is the truth? Who will be bold enough to say, not that the Christian message can be explained in terms of the facts as we know them, but rather that *all* so-called knowledge must be tested against the supreme reality: God incarnate in Jesus Christ, present yesterday, today, until the end, in the power of the Spirit?²

But these questions had been forming in Newbigin’s mind ever since his return from India twenty years before. He had quickly realised that any appraisal of the cultural challenge facing the Church of the West in the 1970s and 80s had to come to terms with the threat posed by the reality of pluralism and the wider implications for mission of the cultural movement of ‘modernity’. In terms of ‘legitimacy’ these changes had radically challenged the way in which traditional notions of ‘truth’ had been understood and formulated. He writes characteristically of the implications of this in his major 1989 book, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Culture*, as follows:

As long as the church is content to offer its beliefs modestly as simply one of the many brands available in the ideological supermarket, no offense is taken. But

¹ See e.g., Newbigin 1977a; 1977b; 1983a; 1988a; 1988c; 1989i; 1989b; 1990j; 1991c; 1993f; 1994a.

² Newbigin 1994b: 72.

the affirmation that the truth revealed in the gospel ought to govern public life is offensive.³

Despite these challenges, however, Newbigin's missiology is consistently driven by a belief that Christians have nevertheless been entrusted with 'truth' which they are obliged to declare. 'The church has to bear witness', as he puts it, 'to the truth which unmask the illusions and falsehoods of modernity'.⁴

At the heart of Newbigin's programme therefore lies the quest for a valid epistemology (a 'legitimizing foundation') on the basis of which believers may witness to the unique revelation entrusted to them, and with which they may make their appeal in the marketplace of ideas. Central to his case is precisely the failure of the Enlightenment itself to provide such an epistemology. Firstly, the Enlightenment's elevation of the faculty of human reasoning proved to be a false dawn to the hopes of finding a universally accepted basis for legitimate knowing. Secondly, its preoccupation with 'Reason' as the only grounds for certainty had effectively subverted the Christian concept of 'Revelation' from its position as the authoritative epistemological basis for true knowledge. In developing his counter-argument, therefore, Newbigin's epistemology is built squarely upon the defence that it is upon the foundation of biblical revelation alone that a secure basis for knowledge is acquired – a basis upon which both assured and authentic judgements about truth may legitimately be made.

The advent of 'post'-modernity has served to refocus this central question of legitimacy in a variety of ways, and though these emerge with intricate and interrelated differences of nuance and emphasis, the central issue nonetheless

³ Newbigin 1989f: 7.

⁴ Newbigin 1991b: 9.

remains. This is clear for example from Jean-François Lyotard's seminal book *The Postmodern Condition*.⁵ Being subtitled 'A Report on Knowledge', it amounts to a sustained attempt to relocate the concept of legitimacy in postmodern terms. His argument dismisses modernity's concept of 'metanarrative' as the location for such legitimacy simply because it has been shown not to work. It also effectively deconstructs the Enlightenment's notions of how legitimacy is to be achieved. But his goal nonetheless is to *re-locate* legitimacy – albeit in more diffused and localised contexts.

How the Church responds to such a challenge is clearly crucial for its survival. Indeed some writers, like John Reader, argue that it is the *key* issue to face under postmodern conditions – not only for missiology, but also for the wider discipline of theology. As he puts it:

This is surely the real challenge for theology to face if it is determined to take seriously the philosophical arguments surrounding Post-Modernity. It is not that Modernity has somehow come to an end or that the challenges of reason have been driven from the field. It is how Christianity is to fit into a situation of plural rationalities where no one discourse can claim dominance over the rest.⁶

By way of prolegomena, Reader's comment opens up the question of the meaning of the term 'postmodern' and its relationship to that which preceded it. Clearly, any interpretation of contemporary mission which concentrates so closely on the impact of 'modernity' and the 'Enlightenment' programme as Newbigin's does, will define its present role in the light of a set of perceptions taken from the past. Any contemporary appraisal of Newbigin's work must come to conclusions, therefore, about the extent to which his vision survives intact in

⁵ Lyotard 1984b.

⁶ Reader 1997: 63.

the cultural transition (however we describe it) from ‘modernity’ to ‘*post-modernity*’. As a prelude to the examination of his work in this context therefore, we need to begin to analyse the nature of this transition more closely.

1.3 From ‘modern’ to ‘postmodern’

Anthony Giddens wrote in 1990 that whereas the idea of a ‘post-industrial’ society had been well explicated, the concepts of ‘post-modernity’ and ‘post-modernism’ had not.⁷ Partly as a result of this, a lack of precision persists over its definition. Charles Jencks states, for example, that ‘The term is now almost as ubiquitous, disliked and misunderstood as its parent, the modern.’⁸ Others despair at the lack of focus apparent within the postmodern ‘milieu’. Ernest Gellner writes for example, that ‘clarity is not conspicuous amongst its marked attributes’,⁹ whilst Os Guinness notes that ‘it often feels as if it is everywhere and nowhere.’¹⁰

Partly for these reasons, the task of defining the relationship between the terms ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ is notoriously difficult. Moreover, distinctions between the nouns postmodern-*ity* and postmodern-*ism* (or modernity and modernism) are far from clear-cut either. Many theorists distinguish between ‘modernity’ and ‘postmodernity’ as historical epochs, and ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ as descriptions of the cultural, philosophical and aesthetic movements or intellectual outlooks associated with each.¹¹ But others tend to use

⁷ Giddens 1990: 45. For the concept of ‘post-industrialism’ he refers to Bell 1973.

⁸ Jencks 1996: 14.

⁹ Gellner 1992: 22.

¹⁰ Guinness 2000: 56.

¹¹ E.g., Eagleton 1996: vii: ‘The word *postmodernism* generally refers to a form of contemporary culture, whereas the term *postmodernity* alludes to a specific historical period’;
(Note continued on next page.)

the terms ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ in broader categories to include both historical and cultural referents.¹²

At a basic level, we may gain widest agreement by defining the ‘postmodern’ as that set of attitudes which is borne out of the consciousness of coming *after* the ‘modern’ – whether as a reaction against it, or as a progression on from it. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, for example, argues that the term ‘postmodernity’ is accurate in the sense that it:

draws attention to the continuity and discontinuity as two faces of the intricate relationship between the present social condition and the formation that preceded and gestated it. It brings into relief the intimate, genetic bond that ties the new, postmodern social condition to *modernity* . . . while at the same time indicating the passing of certain crucial characteristics in whose absence one can no longer adequately describe the social condition as modern in the sense given to the concept by orthodox (modern) social theory.¹³

A more precise definition of the relationship between postmodernity and modernity is much harder to articulate. Nonetheless, building on Bauman’s identification of the elements of both continuity and discontinuity one can begin to define the relationships a little more clearly – particularly in relation to specific

also, Best and Kellner 1991: 2-5; Bauman 1992: vii-xxviii (with 28-9); Giddens 1990: 45-6; Harvey 1990: 99, 327-8; Jencks 1996: 8; Lemert 1997: 62; Lyon 1994: 6-7 (with reservations); Spencer 1997: 159.

¹² E.g., Gellner 1992; Jameson (1983 and 1984c); also Lyotard 1984a: 79 (though see Eagleton 1987 for the view that Lyotard’s use of the phrase ‘le postmoderne’ in Lyotard and Thébaud 1985 and Lyotard 1992 is really to be understood as a reference to a philosophical reaction against metanarrative, rather than to an ‘aesthetic’ movement in the broader sense). Lyotard himself gives two definitions of ‘postmodern’ in the introduction to Lyotard 1984b. The first is broad (‘The word *postmodern* designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts’ – xxiii). The second is narrower and better known (‘Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives’ – xxiv). Perversely he sees some aspects of the postmodern as being ‘premodern’: e.g., ‘A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant’ (Lyotard 1984a: 79).

¹³ Bauman 1992: 187. Cf. also, Winter 1989: 471.

theorists. Fredric Jameson (in his article 'The Politics of Theory'¹⁴) enumerates four ways of describing this relationship, two of which imply some sort of radical break between 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' (what he calls 'anti-modern' as opposed to 'pro-postmodern', and 'promodern' as opposed to 'antipostmodern'), and two of which imply that 'postmodernism' is really to be re-assimilated back into the 'high' modernist tradition. Jameson cites Ihab Hassan and Jürgen Habermas as representatives of the first two positions respectively, and Jean-François Lyotard and Manfredo Tafuri as representatives of the view that postmodernism is really part of 'high' modernism.¹⁵

Jameson's article is helpful in setting out the terrain, or at least in giving a possible grid for further definition, but it tends to polarise the perspectives discussed. To argue, for example, that Lyotard's work is in reality a return to a 'high modernist' position tends to oversimplify his complex relationship with the modernist tradition of the past.¹⁶ To be sure, his view of postmodernity as somehow 'premodern' seems to suggest that Jameson is right. Similarly, Lyotard's solution to the reality of the breakdown of the older metanarratives (that the world's computer data banks be opened up and made universally available¹⁷) suggests a somewhat 'totalising' response from one who says that he

¹⁴ Jameson 1984b.

¹⁵ But see Jencks 1996: 46, who argues that what Lyotard identifies as 'Post' modern is in fact 'Late' modern.

¹⁶ See e.g., Lyon's comment that 'Lyotard's account of things leaves us in a philosophical and linguistic maelstrom' (Lyon 1994: 45).

¹⁷ Lyotard 1984b: 67. Lyotard's argument is that the prevalence of computers creates in effect a new kind of universal logic in which knowledge is increasingly 'commodified'. In this context, not only does the nature of metalanguage change, but power becomes connected to whether or not people have access to this 'commodity'. 'By reinforcing technology, one "reinforces" reality and one's chances of being just and right increase accordingly. Reciprocally, technology is reinforced all the more effectively if one has access to scientific knowledge and decision-making authority' (Lyotard 1984b: 47).

doesn't believe in 'metanarratives'.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Lyotard's insistence that the older 'hierarchies' of knowledge have now dissolved, along with his espousal of the late-Wittgensteinian notion of 'language games' as a way of representing and analysing the dissolution of the discourse of modernity – make him a rather unlikely 'high modernist'. He sits more comfortably with those who acknowledge a decisive break with the past, and who accept postmodern assumptions about the non-referential nature of language and the role of communities in the shaping of their beliefs.

As a consequence, Jameson's article – whilst stimulating as one possible approach to the question of relationships – is ultimately confusing. On the one hand he seeks to identify how theorists assess the relationship between modernity and postmodernity without making reference to their own views. At the same time, however, he tries also to define how they position *themselves* (as either 'modernists' or 'postmodernists') irrespective of their differing views about the possible relationships between the two 'movements'. As a result, his work suffers from a confusion of categories.

As an alternative, distinguishing between these two types of analysis may help to provide greater clarity. In terms of the first type (that which interprets differing views about the relationship between 'modern' and 'postmodern'), two opposing positions may be described: one which argues for a fundamental

¹⁸ The *effects* of such access are not discussed by Lyotard. One could argue that because not everyone has access to computers, such a development would in the end produce another oppressive regime! On the other hand, Lyon (1994: 2-3) argues that the logical result of such global access to 'information' would be a further distancing from older concepts of 'reality'. (When he makes this point, Lyon is discussing the film *Blade Runner* rather than Lyotard, but the point still stands.) Lyotard's own conclusion emerges as a pessimistic acceptance of the inevitable globalisation of 'information'. Perhaps this – as much as anything – makes Lyotard 'postmodern' – in the sense that the new globalisation of technology is not seen by him as 'progress'. Whatever view one takes, Lyotard's work is potentially self-contradictory.

continuity, the other for a discontinuity. In the former category, for example, one could place writers such as the social theorist David Harvey (writing from a Marxist perspective) who argue that though there may be differences of emphasis, there is nonetheless a fundamental continuity between ‘modernity’ and ‘postmodernity’. The best way to approach the phenomenon of ‘postmodernity’ therefore is to assess it as integrally linked to the movement of modernity. He writes accordingly that though ‘postmodernism sees itself . . . for the most part as a wilful and rather chaotic movement to overcome all the supposed ills of modernism’,¹⁹ nonetheless:

. . . there is much more continuity than difference between the broad history of modernism and the movement called postmodernism. It seems more sensible to me to see the latter as a particular kind of crisis within the former, one that emphasizes the fragmentary, the ephemeral, and the chaotic . . . while expressing a deep scepticism as to any particular prescriptions as to how the eternal and immutable should be conceived of, represented, or expressed.²⁰

A second approach views postmodernity as a reaction *against* what went before, and tends to stress its *discontinuity* with ‘modernity’. One could cite the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas as an example of this interpretation. He stresses postmodernity’s rejection of modernity as the fundamental characteristic of its advocates. In his article ‘Modernity versus Postmodernity’, he quotes one such critic (a columnist of the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*) as saying that, ‘Postmodernity definitely presents itself as

¹⁹ Harvey 1990: 115.

²⁰ Harvey 1990: 116. For the Marxist element in this diagnosis, see e.g., Gunton 1993: 69-70. A similar view about the integral relationship between modernity and postmodernity is held by theorists across the field: e.g., literary critics Terry Eagleton (1996: 21), and Eric Jameson (1983: 123f.); architect Charles Jencks (1996: 15); theologians like the liberal-catholic Hans Küng (1991: 22-23), or conservative-evangelical David Wells (1994: 216); and even philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1984b: 79ff.), who (as noted above) implies that what is described as ‘postmodern’ is in certain respects ‘premodern’.

Antimodernity’, and goes on to comment that, ‘This statement describes an emotional current of our times which has penetrated all spheres of intellectual life.’²¹ Habermas’s own view is that postmodernity represents an irrational reaction against an overemphasis upon a particular aspect of modernity and therefore is to be rejected as misguided.²² Similar interpretations of postmodernity as a radical *discontinuity* from modernity are also espoused by theologians such as John Milbank, Christopher Lash and Diogenes Allen – though with differing motivations from those of Habermas.²³

With this brief survey in mind, the related question naturally arises as to whether the postmodern ‘movement’ can be said to be worthy of study in its own right, or whether it merely represents a ‘hotchpotch’ of ideas loosely connected and without credible shape. Again, as in the previous discussions, there remains far from anything approaching consensus. Writers like social anthropologist Ernest Gellner are emphatically dismissive. In his opinion:

Postmodernism . . . is a tortuous, somewhat affected fad, practised by at most some academics living fairly sheltered lives; large parts of it are intelligible only and at most (and often with difficulty) to those who are fully masters of the nuances of three or four abstruse academic disciplines, and much of it is not intelligible to anyone at all.²⁴

²¹ Habermas 1981: 3.

²² Note Jameson’s comment that, ‘We are indebted to Jürgen Habermas for . . . the affirmation of the supreme value of the Modern and the repudiation of the theory, as well as the practice, of postmodernism’ (Jameson 1984b: 58). Habermas’s article was later republished in translation (as Habermas 1983) entitled ‘Modernity – An Incomplete Project’. As the new title suggests, he is convinced that modernity, whilst needing to be revised, is far from having run its course. He writes accordingly: ‘I think that instead of giving up modernity and its project as a lost cause, we should learn from the mistakes of those extravagant programs which have tried to negate modernity’ (1983: 12). See also Habermas 1987a: esp. 336ff. for similar sentiments. For a useful introductory overview of Habermas’s major work (trans. as Habermas 1984 and 1987b), see Giddens 1985.

²³ Milbank 1997a, esp. 265-6 (‘Responses’ 1 and 4); Lash 1996: e.g., 199-201, 246; and Allen 1989: e.g., 2ff..

²⁴ Gellner 1992: 72.

On the other hand, theorists like Zygmunt Bauman argue that – whatever its relationship to ‘modernity’, ‘postmodernity’ is a ‘movement’ that *does* merit examination on its own terms. He writes accordingly that:

Postmodernity is not a transitory departure from the ‘normal state’ of modernity; neither is it a diseased state of modernity, an ailment likely to be rectified, a case of ‘modernity in crisis’. It is, instead, a self-reproducing, pragmatically self-sustainable and logically self-contained social condition defined by distinctive features of its own. A theory of postmodernity therefore cannot be a modified theory of modernity, a theory of modernity with a set of negative markers. An adequate theory of postmodernity may be only constructed in a cognitive space organized by a different set of assumptions; it needs its own vocabulary.²⁵

From a similar perspective, Best and Kellner argue that ‘the emerging postmodern discourses and problematics raise issues which resist easy dismissal or facile incorporation into already established paradigms’.²⁶

Despite the complexity of the terrain, however, it remains possible to identify certain major assumptions within the postmodern ‘matrix’ which have far-reaching implications for mission.

1.3.1 Postmodernity and the rejection of ‘metanarratives’

A central characteristic of postmodernity is the rejection of the grandiose claims made by modernity’s supposed ‘metanarratives’: those ‘interpretive frameworks or ways of understanding the world that are claimed to have a truth or validity that crosses all spatial and temporal boundaries.’²⁷ In reaction against them, Terry Eagleton writes that ‘postmodernity is a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the

²⁵ Bauman 1992: 188.

²⁶ Best and Kellner 1991: 1. Cf. also, Lyon 1994, 4ff..

²⁷ As defined by Reader 1997: 21.

idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation.’²⁸ Elsewhere he writes:

Post-modernism signals the death of such ‘metanarratives’ whose secretly terroristic function was to ground and legitimate the illusion of a ‘universal’ human history. We are now in the process of waking from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of the totality, into the laid-back pluralism of the post-modern, that heterogeneous range of life-styles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to totalize and legitimate itself. . . . Science and philosophy must jettison their grandiose metaphysical claims and view themselves more modestly as just another set of narratives.²⁹

For the origins of this aspect of the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment programme, we might turn to the French writers Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard. With differing emphases both argue (in line with the thesis of Adorno and Horkheimer³⁰) that the claims of the so-called ‘metanarratives’ of the Enlightenment were fundamentally ‘totalizing’ concepts which led in the end to some form of ideological oppression. Whether these were the ideals of ‘Education’ and ‘Progress’ with which Western Imperialism sought to subjugate the colonies; whether they were theories about class and society with which Marxism effectively side-lined the free role of science; or whether they were the sinister beliefs about racial superiority and domination with which Nazism sought to eliminate the Jews, such ‘grand narratives’ tended to subjugate and oppress minority groups.

In the light of the failure of modernity’s ‘metanarratives’ to advance the cause of freedom, both Foucault and Lyotard turn away from the oppressive captivity of such narratives and argue instead that what actually exists as an

²⁸ Eagleton 1996: 7.

²⁹ Eagleton 1987: 194.

³⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno 1972.

explanation of the world and its history is not one ‘grand’ narrative, but many lesser narratives, none of which can claim to be ultimately true for everybody.

(i) Foucault

From Foucault’s point of view, this perspective arises out of a complex discussion of the way in which the notion of ‘power’ is to be understood within cultures and societies.³¹ Foucault’s discussion rejects the approach which sees power as a centralised function of the state, and analyses it in its effects *away* from the centre. In this context, the interplay of ‘power’ structures is a far more complex phenomenon, arising out of the way in which ‘discourses’ function within particular societies. ‘(I)n any given society,’ he writes, ‘there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse.’³² Within this complex:

Each society has its régime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.³³

³¹ The most accessible discussion of this theme (in the form of an autobiographical essay) is found in Foucault 1980: esp. 78-108 (‘The Two Lectures’), and 109-133 (‘Truth and Power’). The latter piece is also found in Rabinow 1984: 51-75.

³² Foucault 1980: 93.

³³ Foucault 1980: 131. Cf. 133: ‘“Truth” is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it.’ For a discussion of Foucault’s analysis of ‘power’ and its relation to ‘truth’, see Taylor 1986: esp. 90ff.. Cf. also, Bernstein 1991: 142-171 (esp. 164f), who argues against the view that Foucault’s analysis of power is basically deterministic (one régime of truth supplanting another, and so on), suggesting instead that Foucault is much more positive about the possibility of ‘counter-resistance’ against the dominance of certain discourses.

Foucault's aim therefore is to reverse the older methodology which analysed power as a centralised function, and to study instead the function and effects of 'power' starting from the periphery.³⁴ In this way, one of the central components of Foucault's project is to re-establish the legitimacy of voices arising from the margins of society (what he calls 'local knowledges') and establish them over against the coercion of more centralised forms of discourse. It is, he says:

. . . a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledges from that subjection, to render them, that is, capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse. It is based on a reactivation of local knowledges . . . in opposition to the scientific hierarchisation of knowledges and the effects intrinsic to their power: this, then, is the project of these disordered and fragmentary genealogies.³⁵

(ii) Lyotard

If Foucault's approach is to destabilise the centralised power of unifying discourses by highlighting the voices of the minorities, Lyotard's is simply that 'metanarratives don't work'. This is summarised in his celebrated and oft-quoted statement: 'Simplifying to the extreme I define postmodern as incredulity toward

³⁴ As he puts it: 'the important thing is not to attempt some kind of deduction of power starting from its centre. . . . One must rather conduct an *ascending* analysis of power, starting, that is, from its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then see how these mechanisms of power have been – and continue to be – invested colonised, utilised, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended etc., by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination' (Foucault 1980: 99).

³⁵ Foucault 1980: 85. Foucault distinguishes between 'archaeology' and 'genealogy'. The former is the methodology required for the analysis of such local 'discursivities', and the latter the means whereby their voice can be 'released' and 'brought into play'. The centralised discourse that Foucault identifies most often is that of 'science': e.g., 'Our task . . . will be to expose and specify the issue at stake in this opposition, this struggle, this insurrection of knowledges against the institutions and against the effects of the knowledge and power that invests scientific discourse' (Foucault 1980: 87).

metanarratives.³⁶ The particular ‘metanarrative’ Lyotard refers to is that of scientific knowledge, and his book, *The Postmodern Condition* (subtitled ‘A Report on Knowledge’), is an examination of the changed way in which such ‘knowledge’ functions under postmodern conditions.³⁷ Gone is the belief of modernity that scientific discourse held the power to sustain a universal legitimising agency. By contrast, contemporary legitimation is expressing itself in a variety of variegated and ‘splintered’ contexts. One of the by-products of this evolution is that the understanding of knowledge as an end in itself is now being replaced by the idea of knowledge as a ‘commodity’ – as information which can be transferred and exchanged.³⁸

The older scheme was sustained by two great ‘myths’ (or ‘narratives’): namely the myth of ‘humanity as the hero of liberty’ (represented by post-revolutionary French thought) in which knowledge was held to be a ‘right’ – to be won if necessary by force,³⁹ and the myth of the ‘unification of knowledge’ (represented by the German speculative idealism of the Hegelian tradition) which effectively made the pursuit of knowledge a passport to the self-fulfilment and spiritual wellbeing of individuals.⁴⁰ By contrast, he argues:

In contemporary society and culture – postindustrial society, postmodern culture – the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.⁴¹

³⁶ Lyotard 1984b: xxiv.

³⁷ ‘Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age’ (Lyotard 1984b: 3).

³⁸ Lyotard speaks in this context of the ‘computerization of society’ (1984b: 3, 7, 47).

³⁹ Lyotard 1984b: 31f..

⁴⁰ Lyotard 1984b: 32ff..

⁴¹ Lyotard 1984b: 37.

In preference to such unifying narratives, Lyotard utilises the late-Wittgensteinian concept of ‘language games’ to articulate the contemporary way in which ‘knowledge’ functions.⁴² In this context, legitimation is acquired at a more localised level by the way in which the language of ‘customs’ and ‘performative utterances’ operates amongst the groups of people who use them.⁴³ In this scenario, any emerging concept of ‘truth’ must be radically reconceived, and becomes increasingly difficult to define. ‘Truth’ is effectively localised because individual communities envisage and articulate it in different ways according to background, culture and custom. Each operates – in Wittgenstein’s terminology – with its own ‘language game’. As an example of the resulting ‘boundaries’ within which this idea of ‘truth’ operates, Lyotard describes the way in which they function within the scientific community. He writes:

It is recognized that the conditions of truth, in other words, the rules of the game of science, are immanent in that game, that they can only be established within the bonds of a debate that is already scientific in nature, and that there is no proof that the rules are good than the consensus extended to them by the experts.⁴⁴

Outside this context, the understanding of ‘truth’ may be different, in the sense that elsewhere a different ‘language game’ operates. The result may often be a that a radical ‘incommensurability’ exists between such ‘local’ narratives, with no external legitimating referent. ‘If this “delegitimation” is pursued in the

⁴² Lyotard 1984b: 9-10. Cf. Wittgenstein 1963: # 19, 23, 241.

⁴³ E.g., Lyotard 1984b: 19: ‘What is a “good” prescriptive or evaluative utterance, a “good” performance in denotative or technical matters? They are all judged to be “good” because they conform to the relevant criteria (of justice, beauty, truth, and efficiency respectively) accepted in the social circle of the “knower’s” interlocutors. . . . The consensus that permits such knowledge to be circumscribed and makes it possible to distinguish one who knows from one who doesn’t (the foreigner, the child) is what constitutes the culture of a people.’ Cf. also 65. For a further description of his ‘non-functionalist’ nature of ‘language’ see Lyotard 1992: 52f..

⁴⁴ Lyotard 1984b: 29.

slightest and if its scope is widened', he comments, 'the road is then open for an important current of postmodernity: science plays its own game; it is incapable of legitimating the other language games.'⁴⁵ He continues:

The social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games. The social bond is linguistic, but is not woven with a single thread. It is a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number) of language games, obeying different rules.⁴⁶

'Truth' in this context is a notion defined by the language of those who 'manufacture' it. It is not something imposed from without. Rather – to use Lyotard's words – it is 'immanent' within whatever 'game' is specified.

One of the profound implications of this is the threat that it poses to those who view 'truth' in less relativised ways – not least to writers and thinkers such as Newbigin himself. Central to this challenge is its questioning of how differing 'narratives' or 'discourses' can relate to one another under postmodern conditions if in essence they do not understand one another's 'language'. In apologetic terms, for example, it raises the question as to whether Christians are able to communicate with non-Christians if there is no perceived framework within which to agree or disagree? Does 'dialogue' come to an end? And if not, on what basis is it allowed to continue?

In more general terms, such an analysis evokes a sense of cultural 'fluidity', and an accompanying sense of 'truth chaos' which takes us near to the heart of much postmodern thinking. Part of the reason for this is that Foucault in particular (and to a lesser extent Lyotard) is indebted to the fundamental insights of Friedrich Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth century. Nietzsche argued that

⁴⁵ Lyotard 1984b: 40.

⁴⁶ Lyotard 1984b: 40.

the epistemological methods of the ‘Enlightenment’ could not in the end make sense of the evident chaos and fragmentation of life, but would lead ultimately – if its premises were followed – only to despair, and even to nihilism. With this background in mind, David Harvey has written that

... the most startling fact about postmodernism [is] its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic. . . . It does not try to transcend it, counteract it, or even to define the ‘eternal and immutable’ elements that might lie within it. Postmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is.⁴⁷

This general line of interpretation represents postmodernity as a movement characterized by a fundamental reaction against what has gone before – particularly in its dealings with concepts like ‘tradition’ and ‘authority’. Indeed, as Harvey puts it: ‘Fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or “totalizing” discourses (to use the favoured phrase) are the hallmark of postmodern thought.’⁴⁸

If the rejection of such universalizing narratives implies a distancing from monolithic concepts like ‘history’, ‘tradition’ and its implied relative ‘authority’, then Fredric Jameson’s term ‘pastiche’ emerges as a useful word to describe the postmodern predilection to ‘play’ with what has gone before.⁴⁹ In architectural and artistic terms, this leads to a ‘random cannibalization of all the styles of the past’,⁵⁰ whilst in terms of the more general relationship between present and past, he writes that:

⁴⁷ Harvey 1990: 44.

⁴⁸ Harvey 1990: 9.

⁴⁹ Jameson 1983: 113f. Cf. also Jameson 1984c: 64-65.

⁵⁰ Jameson 1984c: 65-66. For the classic work on postmodern influences within the field of architecture see Jencks 1978. Although the use of the term ‘postmodern’ can be traced back to writers such as Frederico de Oniz who coined the term *postmodernismo* in 1934, and used it to describe a reaction from *within* modernism rather than a movement that would transcend it, and to Arnold Toynbee who in 1939 suggested that the modern age had ended in 1914 and

(Note continued on next page.)

what was once . . . the organic genealogy of the bourgeois collective project . . . has meanwhile itself become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum. . . . In faithful conformity to poststructuralist linguistic theory, the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts.⁵¹

The missiological implication of these general trends is profound. For once any conception of 'metanarrative' (or 'ultimate' truth) is removed from the sphere of legitimate ideological possibilities, Christian truth-claims evaporate from all but a 'localised' sphere. In a postmodern context therefore, it raises once more the question of how an idea for which 'truth' claims are being made is to be upheld outside of a narrow and localised frame of reference – particularly when the ideas carry within their own presuppositional framework a claim that 'truth' transcends the 'local'.

1.3.2 Postmodernity and the exercise of 'reason'

Alongside the postmodern rejection of 'metanarrative', it is commonplace to associate postmodernity with a radical scepticism about the Enlightenment view (closely bound up with the development of the scientific method) that 'reason' could supply firm grounds for deciding between what is 'true' and what is 'false'. Whether this confidence was founded upon the 'intuitions' of Descartes, the 'sense-impressions' of Hume, or the scientific 'certainties' of the twentieth-century positivists, classical 'foundationalist' epistemology has all but

that the era which emerged out of the ruins of the 1st world war should be described as 'Post-Modern', it was Jencks who first made widespread use of the term. For an analysis of the origins of the term in philosophical and social contexts, see Best and Kellner 1991: 1-33; Sampson 1994; and more generally, Rose 1991: 3-20. For its use in primarily architectural and artistic contexts, see Jencks 1978: 6-8; and Jencks 1996: 17ff., and 14-15 where he lists the major works on 'Postmodernism', dividing them into three phases: 1870-1950, 1950-1980, and 1980 to the present.

⁵¹ Jameson 1984c: 66.

collapsed under postmodern conditions, and its demise has been noted by writers across various disciplines.⁵² As a result, the Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff concludes that ‘in a most fundamental way traditional epistemology has come unstuck in recent years – with the result that the field of epistemology is now filled with fascinating turmoil and chaos, and with new probes in many directions.’⁵³

As part of this ‘turmoil’, debates about the function of ‘rationality’ itself add a further dimension to interpretations of the transition between modernity and postmodernity. These debates may be seen to function at a number of levels. It is characteristic amongst some analysts, for example, to accuse postmodern writers of ‘irrationalism’, or of having effectively turned their backs on the efficacy of Enlightenment notions of reason altogether.⁵⁴ But even if there is a dimension of truth to this position, it is clear that the picture is much more complex and nuanced than some seem to suppose.

As it is generally developed by postmodern writers, the contemporary reaction against modernity may be characterised as a critique of the *form* and *function* of reason central to the Enlightenment project. Kant referred to this as ‘technical-practical’ reason – the way of arriving at the most efficient means of achieving a given end.⁵⁵ The cultural elevation of this particular function of reason may indeed be liable to the postmodern critique that it tends to work itself

⁵² For useful surveys, cf. Harvey 1990: 10-39 who explores diverse cultural dimensions of this collapse; or Reader 1997, who concentrates on theological and philosophical perspectives. Cf. also Stout 1981.

⁵³ Wolterstorff 1983: 4.

⁵⁴ E.g., Habermas 1981: 13 (referring to Foucault as an ‘irrationalist’); also, more generally Gellner 1992.

⁵⁵ Kant 1993: 241. His other two categories of rationality are the ‘theoretical-speculative’ and the ‘moral-practical’.

out in an inherently *amoral* way and is therefore prone to modes of expression that are potentially oppressive. Indeed, in this context the spectre of the Holocaust is paraded as the paradigm of what Enlightenment reason at its worst can eventually lead to.⁵⁶

But notwithstanding such a potentiality, it is clear that the continuing exercise of reason *itself* is not being rejected by leading thinkers of the postmodern era. The work of Jürgen Habermas is clearly significant in this regard in representing a viewpoint which disavows the dismissal of rational discourse altogether, arguing as he does that modernity – as it is now constituted – is the end-product of the over-emphasis upon one particular aspect of ‘reason’.⁵⁷ The concept of rationality itself is not the problem, he argues, but rather its inner dislocation. As a result, it is vital not to jettison the concept of reason altogether, but rather to recover its more ‘holistic’ conception that has been lost as a result of the Enlightenment.⁵⁸

But even amongst those writers most centrally associated with postmodern thinking – Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida – there is no suggestion that the role of reason is being rejected altogether. Foucault, for example, is much more interested in the uses to which reason is put than in any notion of its being abandoned totally. In one interview, for example, he was asked the question: ‘How do you see post-modernism . . . in

⁵⁶ See e.g., Bauman 1989. Cf. Horkheimer and Adorno 1972: 6: ‘Enlightenment is totalitarian’; and 9: ‘Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them.’ Cf. also more generally, 168-208.

⁵⁷ What Habermas calls ‘cognitive-instrumental’ rationality (e.g., Habermas 1981: 8; 1984: 10ff.).

⁵⁸ Habermas’s project is essentially to complement the idea of a ‘cognitive-instrumental rationality’ with a more all-encompassing conception which he describes as ‘communicative rationality’.

terms of the historical and philosophical questions that are posed by it?’ He replied in the following words:

I think that the central issue of philosophy and critical thought since the eighteenth century has always been, still is, and will, I hope, remain the question: *What* is this Reason that we use? What are its historical effects? What are its limits, and what are its dangers?

He continued:

... if philosophy was a function within critical thought, it is precisely to accept this sort of spiral, this sort of revolving door of rationality that refers us to its necessity, to its indispensability, and at the same time, to its intrinsic dangers.⁵⁹

Likewise, Lyotard’s programme has more to do with the inability of the ‘metanarrative’ of reason to produce a context in which emancipatory political action is feasible than it has to do with the dismissal of reason *itself* as a constituent part of the makeup of a viable contemporary discourse. His general view about the relationship between modernity and postmodernity is well represented by the following statement made in an interview in 1988: ‘I have said and will say again that “postmodernism” signifies not the end of modernism, but another relation to modernism.’⁶⁰ But it is clear that what he describes as ‘another relation to modernism’ refers to the different way in which he believes reason must now operate in a non-metanarrative, post-Enlightenment world. This becomes clear for example in the way in which he uncovers and identifies the different ‘language games’ that operate even within a supposedly unified discourse such as that of the scientific community. Such communities he argues,

⁵⁹ Undated interview (entitled ‘Space, Knowledge, and Power’) in Rabinow 1984: 249. This statement is interesting not least in the context of Habermas’ criticism that Foucault is guilty of contradiction in appearing to discard the normative role of reason, yet at the same employing it.

⁶⁰ Quoted (from a 1988 interview) in Reader 1997: 61-2.

are characterised not by one language system alone, but by a ‘plurality of languages’. As a result of this he comments that:

Obviously a major shift in the notion of reason accompanies this new arrangement. The principle of a universal metalanguage is replaced by the principle of a plurality of formal and axiomatic systems capable of arguing the truth of denotative statements.⁶¹

Lyotard argues therefore that it is inappropriate to speak of the ‘demise’ of reason under postmodern conditions (except of course as a ‘metanarrative’), but rather that its function needs to be reassessed and refocused within a more disseminated and localised context. As he puts it:

Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction.⁶²

In this newer postmodern context, therefore, the role of reason is not dismissed by Lyotard as being no longer relevant, even if it must now attain to less exalted ends than it once did. As Zygmunt Bauman argues, its role is no longer to sustain metanarratives, but rather to distinguish between the rival conceptions of reality which are sustained within local communities. He states accordingly that: ‘The task of philosophical reason seems to be shifting from legislating about the correct way of separating truth from untruth to legislating about the correct way of translating between separate languages, each generating and sustaining its own truths.’⁶³

⁶¹ Lyotard 1984b: 43.

⁶² Lyotard 1984b: 41.

⁶³ Bauman 1997: 116-7.

In a similar vein, Jacques Derrida, in developing his ‘deconstructionist’ notions of language, also does not abandon the role of reason in postmodern discourse. He says, for example:

If there is here and there in France a critique of reason, e.g., by me . . . then that doesn’t at all mean a rejection of reason, a tendency towards irrationalism, but, on the contrary . . . a responsibility and a consciousness of the responsibility of the philosopher before reason. . . . Therefore, the opposition between rationalism and irrationalism, as it solidifies from time to time these days in Germany and France, seems supremely crude.⁶⁴

He goes on: ‘I maintain that deconstruction isn’t irrational. But it also doesn’t aim at producing a new reason or order of reason. For all of that, it’s a symptom of the change in the order of rationality within which we live.’⁶⁵ As with Foucault and Lyotard, therefore, what is under discussion for Derrida is not the abandonment of rationality altogether but rather a debate about the refocusing of its role within the context of a newer postmodern paradigm.

As a result, though postmodernity has resulted in the ‘demise of foundationalism’,⁶⁶ there still exists an uncertainty about the kind of discourse that can now legitimately exist. Richard Bernstein describes this in terms of a ‘Cartesian Anxiety’ that ‘hovers in the background of the controversies waged by objectivists and relativists.’ As he puts it:

With a chilling clarity Descartes leads us with an apparent and ineluctable necessity to a grand and seductive Either/Or. *Either* there is some support for

⁶⁴ Rötzer 1995: 43.

⁶⁵ Rötzer 1995: 45. See also his comment (quoted from a 1985 lecture in Graham and Walton 1991: 1: ‘We have to deconstruct, to take time to deconstruct the Enlightenment. But when I say deconstruct a thing, I do not say we are against it, or that in any situation I will fight it, be on the other side.’).

⁶⁶ The title of Grenz 2000.

our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos.⁶⁷

As far as Newbigin's own analysis of this development is concerned, it is clear that an emphasis upon modernity's elevation of the role of 'reason' in the wider context of the Enlightenment 'programme' is central to his own thesis, as indeed is his interpretation of its subsequent demise. As a result of this, the missiological conclusions that he draws are integrally related to such an analysis. This in itself raises important questions: not least whether such an identification of the inflated prominence of the place of reason within modernity's worldview represents an accurate or adequate portrayal of the facts. But it also leads to some interesting questions about his view of the place reason should occupy in the continuing missiological enterprise. By way of anticipation, here as an example are words from *The Other Side of 1984*:

... if the immense achievements of autonomous reason seem to have produced a world which is at best meaningless and at worst full of demons, then it could be ... that we shall not find renewal within the framework of the assumptions which the Enlightenment held to be 'self-evident', that there is needed a radical conversion, a new starting point which begins as an act of trust in divine grace as something simply given to be received in faith and gratitude.⁶⁸

This new 'starting-point' that Newbigin refers to is that of 'revelation'. But his desire to re-establish revelation as a 'Barthian' *a priori* upon which all else must be built raises the question of how this assertion is to be related to any ongoing exercise of 'reason', and to the part that reason now plays in establishing such an *a priori*. How, for example, is revelation to be *accepted* as the ground of the missiological enterprise if not by the prior exercise of reason: even simply at

⁶⁷ Bernstein 1983: 18 (emphasis original).

⁶⁸ Newbigin 1983b: 25.

the level of distinguishing such a starting point from other competing alternatives? Or at another level, how is revelation – once it has been accepted as the *a priori* – to be interpreted by the reader except by some exercise of reasoning powers?

If Newbiggin's interpretation of modernity is therefore characterised by a rejection of its preoccupation with a 'foundationalist' approach to reason, the continuing status and role of rationality under *postmodern* conditions emerges as an issue of central importance. We shall return to this question as the thesis develops.

1.4 Postmodernity, legitimacy and theology

Contemporary theological responses to the issues raised by the postmodern challenge to 'legitimacy' are understandably diverse. This is unsurprising, given the fact that individual writers are always influenced by different *aspects* of the question at issue, as well as being variously affected by the interplay and inter-relationships between presupposition and interpretation. In turn the various 'disciplines' of theology (including that of missiology) are influenced and moulded by the presuppositions on which they are based, whether these presuppositions are openly acknowledged by their proponents or not.

A further reason for the variety of responses arises out of the nature of 'postmodernity' itself. For even to write about 'postmodernity' implies some sense of order to its outlook; some agenda, or programme. But as has already become clear, it is impossible to describe this contemporary 'movement' in anything approaching monolithic terms. As Jameson puts it: '. . . it seems to me

essential to grasp “postmodernism” not as a style, but rather as a cultural dominant: a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate features.’⁶⁹ If anything therefore can be identified as central to its concerns, it is precisely the existence of a ‘conceptual’ outlook which celebrates a ‘plurality’ of meanings. As Bauman puts it: ‘Postmodernity is marked by a view of the human world as irreducibly and irrevocably pluralistic, split into a multitude of sovereign units and sites of authority, with no horizontal or vertical order, either in actuality or in potency.’⁷⁰ As a result, ‘The postmodern condition is a site of constant mobility and change, but no clear direction of development.’⁷¹

Accordingly, because theologians are both responding to, whilst at the same time being influenced by such pluralities, there is an added complexity to the discussion in hand. This will impinge upon our discussion of Newbigin’s own writings of course. What, for example, are his own presuppositions, and can these be sustained on the grounds that he himself puts forward? Could it be the case that his own response to the demise of modernity is itself ‘modern’ (or even ‘postmodern’) in its method and construction, or is it one which can genuinely be said to transcend the terms of the ‘modern’/‘postmodern’ debate?

By way of an introduction to this debate, we shall briefly review three contemporary theological ‘positions’ which have been adopted by writers seeking to engage with the postmodern debate about ‘legitimacy’. This will help to set Newbigin’s own contribution to the debate in its wider context.

⁶⁹ Jameson 1984c: 56.

⁷⁰ Bauman 1992: 35.

⁷¹ Bauman 1992: 189.

1.4.1 ‘Postmodernity embraced’: there is no such thing as ‘truth’ anymore

The first position might be illustrated by the work of Don Cupitt, who takes the view that since postmodernity has in effect swept away all possibility of ‘metanarratives’, the concept of ‘truth’ no longer serves any useful purpose. The following words from his 1990 book *Creation Out of Nothing* are characteristic:

We have lost the ability to make and hold on to the great distinctions by which, historically, capital-P Philosophy put down fancy, exalted Reason, and set the intellectual world in place. One may be cheerful or pessimistic about the resulting cultural situation, but at any rate it is a rather novel one. . . . its crucial feature is the disappearance of the real, our growing incapacity – our lack, even, of the *will* – to separate truth from fiction, the objectively real from the flux of human interpretations.⁷²

One could argue (as does Anthony Thiselton⁷³) that Cupitt’s own grounds for making such a case have shifted from an earlier (‘modernist’) Kantian defence of the ‘non-realism’ of human conceptions and constructions of ‘God’ to one in which (increasingly influenced by the French postmodern writers Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault), he mounts a similar attack on the grounds of the ‘differed’ nature of language. To quote again from his 1990 book – which was written when his attack had become increasingly influenced by such postmodern critiques – Cupitt makes the point that:

Since Kant the world has increasingly come to be seen as just the product of the interactions of a lot of finite human viewpoints. For social interactions generate meanings and therefore language, and therefore knowledge which is carried within language, and therefore the world which is produced within our knowledge (because we have no way of separating the way the world really is from the way it is presented within our own knowledge if it). So the world has gradually turned into a changing human cultural construction. . . . We can compare different human ‘perceptions’ of reality with each other, of course, but we cannot compare them with reality-as-such. Our own new provisional

⁷² Cupitt 1990: 77-8.

⁷³ Thiselton 1995: 81-92.

language-generated world just isn't quite as real and solid as the old God-made Cosmos used to be.⁷⁴

He later concludes that:

As language shifts, flows and changes all the time, so it carries our own identity and that of everything else with it. Everything undergoes continual reinvention and transformation. We don't hold on; we are mobile, wanderers. . . . Rather, we float along with language, reimagining and recreating ourselves and our world all the time.⁷⁵

Whatever the grounds of the attack (and one could argue that *whichever* route is taken, the conclusion he arrives at is the same), the advent of postmodernity has served to buttress Cupitt's non-realist conception of 'God'. In his opinion: 'Truth is human, socially-produced, historically developed, plural and changing.'⁷⁶ On this understanding any suggestion that there is something 'real out there' to which theological language might 'refer' is ultimately a rather meaningless question. 'Postmodernity' he writes 'is a flux of images and fictions.'⁷⁷ The resulting view of 'truth' constitutes a firm rejection of older foundationalist conceptions. Don Cupitt is anti-foundationalist, and proud of it.

In this context, to speak of 'mission' in any one of a number of traditional understandings of the term becomes both futile and even offensive. For to invite another to consider the 'claims' of Christianity, let alone to be 'converted' into that faith (or into any other faith for that matter) would immediately imply that a believer was operating with some sort of external 'truth-referent' on the basis of which others are being invited to believe. Not surprisingly, therefore, the notion

⁷⁴ Cupitt 1990: 68.

⁷⁵ Cupitt 1990: 201.

⁷⁶ Cupitt 1990: 45.

⁷⁷ Cupitt 1990: 77.

of ‘mission’ is totally absent from Cupitt’s writings.

1.4.2 ‘Postmodernity rejected’: the nature of ‘truth’ hasn’t changed

At the other end of the ‘spectrum’ from Cupitt is the view that the status of epistemological enquiry – as well as the methods by which it is to be pursued – have not fundamentally altered with the advent of postmodernity, and therefore that access to ‘truth’ is to be pursued in essentially the same ways in which it has been in the past.

This, broadly speaking, is the position adopted by writers such as Harold Netland. Although he is responding more specifically to the questions raised by contemporary developments within the debate about religious pluralism rather than to the issue of ‘postmodernity’ as such, he nonetheless represents this perspective well, and his approach will be discussed briefly at this point for three reasons.

In the first place one can argue that the very notion of ‘pluralism’ which he addresses (one which he identifies as being represented by the writers of the symposium *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*⁷⁸) is characteristically ‘postmodern’. For the contemporary ‘pluralist’ paradigm (of which the ‘exclusivist’ and ‘inclusivist’ approaches were progenitors) represents a disavowal (or at least a radical redefinition) of what Gordon Kaufman describes in the opening chapter of the book as ‘the absolutistic claims about divine revelation and ultimate truth that have often been regarded as central to faith’.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Hick and Knitter 1987.

⁷⁹ Kaufman 1988: 3.

Secondly, the position from which Netland seeks to combat this challenge is one which adopts a mode of apologetic that is clearly (if not self-consciously) ‘modernist’ in its methodology. By implication, the adoption of such an apologetic demonstrates that whatever the nature of the contemporary threat to the concept of ‘truth’ which writers such as Knitter and Hick espouse, this threat is to be countered – in Netland’s view – along ‘traditional’ lines which could be argued to be reliant upon certain central ‘Enlightenment’ assumptions.

Thirdly, not only does Netland’s approach provide an illuminating parallel to Newbigin’s own response to the questions of pluralism and truth, but Newbigin’s approach has come under criticism from Netland himself.⁸⁰

Briefly stated, Netland is deeply concerned to establish what he calls ‘objective, non-arbitrary criteria’ with which to evaluate the truth-claims of the different religious worldviews. He writes accordingly:

I will argue that, contrary to the emerging consensus in certain theological and missiological circles, some nonarbitrary criteria exist to evaluate various religious traditions, and that it is indeed legitimate for a Christian to conclude that other religions which embrace basic beliefs incompatible with central tenets of Christian faith are false.⁸¹

What follows is an intricately developed ten-point checklist designed to enable the ‘neutral’ observer to assess on rational grounds whether a given religious system is truthful or not. Two comments are in order at this point. Firstly, Netland’s approach is put forward as *a*-cultural: that is to say it is designed to supply criteria sufficiently ‘objective’ and ‘exterior’ to individual

⁸⁰ He argues, for example, that Newbigin’s stance effectively ‘forfeits the right to reject competing perspectives as false, but it too faces the charge of self-refutation’ (Netland 1991: 180). Elsewhere he argues that ‘Newbigin’s statements make unnecessary and problematic concessions to presuppositionism’ (*sic*) (Netland 1994: 106). Newbigin only directly refers to Netland’s specific work in an extended footnote to his essay, 1994d: 85f..

⁸¹ Netland 1991: 152.

cultures that they provide a *neutral* point of reference. And secondly, in seeking such 'neutral' ground, Netland's methodology is actually wedded to a particular view about the epistemic status of beliefs. He clashes with Newbigin at precisely this point, claiming that Newbigin must necessarily be a 'fideist' in arguing from *within* the framework of revelation that his faith is 'true'.⁸² 'Obviously,' he writes, 'simply appealing to what is held to be the self-certifying nature of one's own faith commitments as the proper criterion by which to evaluate other perspectives is inadequate for settling the question of truth.'⁸³ In contrast to this approach, therefore, Netland espouses an epistemological method which weighs 'truth' on grounds which he believes to be epistemically *prior* to those of faith. He writes as follows:

Epistemic justification has to do with the justification or warrant for one's beliefs – the question whether there are sufficient grounds for one's beliefs. Ultimately, the question of the justification for making judgements about alternative religious beliefs on the basis of one's own religious commitments hangs upon the logically prior question of the justification for accepting one's basic religious beliefs in the first place.⁸⁴

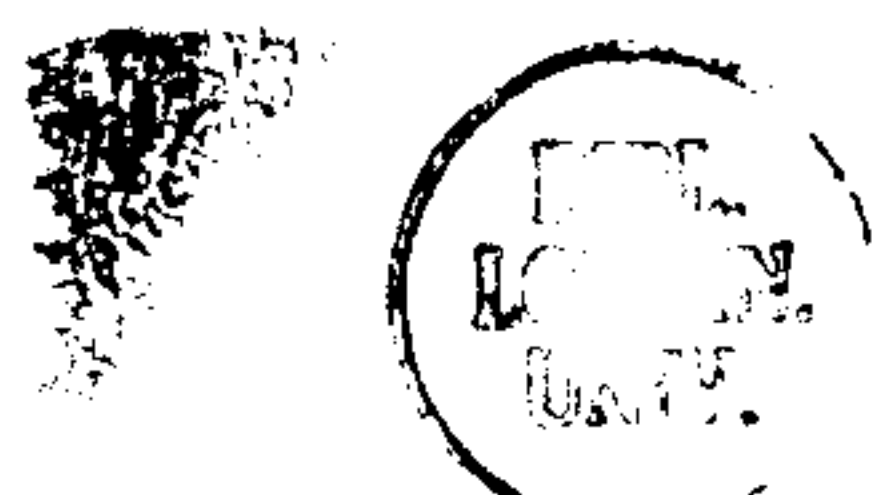
It has been argued that Netland's own proposals fail to be as 'neutral' as he himself would like them to be. After all, they are wedded to a philosophical approach which is grounded in some very characteristically 'Enlightenment' assumptions about truth and logic, rationality and verification.⁸⁵ As a result therefore, one can say that Netland's approach represents an attempt to defend the 'truthfulness' of Christian faith on grounds with which any sane-minded and neutral observer would concur (an approach which implicitly carries within itself

⁸² See e.g., Netland 1991: 178f..

⁸³ Netland 1991: 179.

⁸⁴ Netland 1991: 194-5.

⁸⁵ See for example the critique in D'Costa 1993, or Perry 1996. (Netland replies to Perry in Netland 1996.)



the ability to withstand the onslaught of cultural change). At the same time (and for the same reason), it represents a methodology whose vulnerability is accentuated in the wake of the postmodern transition, precisely because of its commitment to an Enlightenment foundationalism now believed by many to have disappeared.

1.4.3 ‘Postmodernity nuanced’: the nature of ‘truth’ is now different

A third option covers a range of approaches, all of which may be located somewhere between the two outlined above. Implicitly, each of these is sympathetic with the view expressed in the title of a recent book: *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be*.⁸⁶ For whilst drawing back from the radical relativist conclusions represented by writers like Cupitt, many theologians nonetheless want to move away from the classical and foundationalist traditions of previous generations. They recognise that with the advent of postmodernity, it is no longer possible to speak of the defence of theological and philosophical legitimacy in terms that imply, and then appeal to, some ‘neutral’ point of reference or external notion of ‘truth’ – whether this is mediated by tradition or by individuals. As a result, whatever the gains and losses under postmodernity, they argue that contemporary theology has to recognise that for ‘truth’ to be legitimated at *any* level, it has to accept the fact that this is now more ‘localised’ than some traditional approaches might be prepared to concede. This may not necessarily destroy the concept of ‘truth’ altogether, but – if accepted – must alter the way in which such ‘truth’ is articulated and understood. Rather than fighting against

⁸⁶ Middleton and Walsh 1995b.

‘postmodernity’ therefore, theologians would do better to welcome it and develop apologetic strategies accordingly.

With certain differences in emphasis, writers like George Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank have all adopted this more ‘moderate’ position. Each comes to the conclusion that within the postmodern paradigm, theology has to come to terms with the necessity of a new sense of ‘accommodation’ to the spirit of the age, and with the challenge and opportunity that it is seen to afford.

(i) *George Lindbeck*

In many ways, George Lindbeck may be regarded as the pioneer of this position.⁸⁷ He argues in his short but seminal book, *The Nature of Doctrine* (subtitled ‘Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age’)⁸⁸ that given contemporary assumptions – particularly about the ‘deobjectification’ of religion under modernity⁸⁹ – the function of religious language is not so much to propose truth claims for wider legitimation, but rather to supply adherents of belief systems with the language to express what he calls their *own* collection of ‘communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action.’⁹⁰ This way of

⁸⁷ Though his views about the need to understand beliefs in the context of the communities in which they operate is by no means an insight peculiar to him. See e.g. the earlier work of Winch (1958: esp. 10-15, 86-91), who was amongst the first to draw social and communitarian conclusions from the later insights of Wittgenstein. Lindbeck is also indebted to the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann; in particular their perception of the way in which the social setting of individuals and communities affects understandings of reality. (Lindbeck acknowledges this indebtedness in 1990: 493, where he states that in the ‘60s he gained a great deal from the ‘Wittgensteinians’: T.S. Kuhn, Peter Berger, Clifford Geertz, and other contemporary non-foundationalists.)

⁸⁸ Lindbeck 1984.

⁸⁹ A term he takes from the work of Berger and Luckmann (Berger and Luckmann 1967: e.g., 49ff., 78ff.).

⁹⁰ Lindbeck 1984: 18.

conceptualising religion in terms of the language of self-referentiality is one that he describes as ‘cultural-linguistic’, and its implied view of ecclesiastical doctrine is developed in terms of what he defines as ‘regulative’ or ‘rule’ theory.⁹¹

Lindbeck utilises this ‘cultural-linguistic’ model as a means of describing and articulating the belief systems and practices of religious traditions via the language that they use. As he puts it: ‘a religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought.’⁹² In other words, it can be said both to describe the manner in which beliefs and religious practices function within a given community, but also to ‘regulate’ and determine that manner.⁹³

From this foundation, Lindbeck proceeds to develop his ideas in at least two significant directions. Firstly, once agreement is reached that this *is* how language functions within religious communities, it becomes clear that it can only do so effectively for members of the community in question. This is because, in line with the views of Lyotard, such languages are inherently and necessarily peculiar to the traditions in which they are formulated. Secondly, and as a direct result of this, it becomes impossible for an outsider to assess the ‘reality’ or authenticity of any given set of religious expressions and experiences, unless they already share the appropriate linguistic framework of the particular community in question. As he puts it, ‘religions, like languages, can be understood only in their

⁹¹ Lindbeck 1984: 18.

⁹² Lindbeck 1984: 33.

⁹³ Questions about the ‘truth’ of doctrines when viewed in this way cannot be answered from ‘outside’ the system in which they operate. Rather, they are ‘intrasytemic’ or ‘intratextual’ (Lindbeck 1984: 64-66). For the view that this aspect of Lindbeck’s proposals establishes him firmly as ‘through and through postmodern’, see Murphy and McClendon 1989: 205-207.

own terms, not by transposing them into an alien speech.’⁹⁴ In other words, an outsider must first be ‘apprenticed’ or inaugurated into the language structure of the community before being able to judge whether its members are demonstrating an authentic and genuine faith or not.

Such an approach clearly has inevitable and far-reaching implications for the question of whether religious communities are able to legitimate their own practices and beliefs in the minds of outsiders. This is due primarily to Lindbeck’s commitment to the ‘intratextual’ nature of religious language which establishes Christian truth as both ‘unique’, but also ‘untranslatable’.⁹⁵ As a result, he writes that:

genuine bilingualism (not to mention mastery of many religious languages) is so rare and difficult as to leave basically intact the barrier to extramural communication posed by untranslatability in religious matters. Those for whom conversation is the key to solving interreligious problems are likely to be disappointed.’⁹⁶

In missiological terms, therefore, Lindbeck’s outlook is best described as ‘doubtful’. ‘Postliberals’, he writes, ‘are bound to be skeptical, not about missions, but about apologetics and foundations.’⁹⁷ The ‘translatability’ of the Christian message is limited in his view entirely to the ability of believers to live out authentic Christian lives and so to demonstrate the power of the gospel. Accordingly, he writes that, ‘the reasonableness of a religion is largely a function of its assimilative powers, of its ability to provide an intelligible interpretation in its own terms of the varied situations and realities adherents encounter.’⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Lindbeck 1984: 129.

⁹⁵ E.g., ‘the uniqueness of the gospel in relation to pluralism . . . concerns the untranslatability of the message and the uniqueness of the elect community’ (Lindbeck 1997: 424-5).

⁹⁶ Lindbeck 1997: 427.

⁹⁷ Lindbeck 1984: 129.

⁹⁸ Lindbeck 1984: 131.

Having stated this as a possibility, however, he nonetheless remains sceptical about whether the Christian community has the resources to prove itself successful in the business of attracting outsiders into its membership. The ‘catechetical’ models of church growth (whereby outsiders are attracted by Christian churches to learn about the faith) are largely fruitless for the simple reason that the Church has generally failed genuinely to live out its alternative agenda in the face of religious decline, and has been influenced by the views and beliefs of the majority within the surrounding secularised culture. And even when outsiders to the Christian faith have picked up what he describes as ‘tag ends’ of ideas about Christianity, these have been enough to convince them that they have sufficient data upon which to reject the idea of Christian faith.⁹⁹ In the face of this, invitations on the part of Christians to ‘further exploration’ are rejected on the assumption by outsiders that whatever there is to know about Christianity is already sufficiently known. He concludes that until such time as continuing decline results in a Christian community small enough to be compelled to *own* its narrative and to live accordingly, the Church will continue to limp along by means of a third option, which he describes as follows:

The experience and self-identity of even the unchurched masses remain deeply influenced by the religious past. . . . They are immunized against catechesis, but are sometimes interested in translations of the gospel in existential, depth-psychological, or liberationist language that articulates their latent Christianity.¹⁰⁰

Lindbeck is not altogether clear on what is meant by such ‘translations’ but he clearly perceives that they fall short of the ideal in terms of producing true disciples. The future of Christian mission (indeed for Christianity *itself* as a

⁹⁹ Lindbeck 1984: 133.

cultural force) is indissolubly tied therefore to the nature of the Church and its effectiveness to demonstrate authentic Christian community-life. He writes that, 'It is above all by the character of its communal life that it witnesses, that it proclaims the gospel and serves the world.'¹⁰¹ He continues, 'The primary Christian mission, in short, is not to save souls but to be a faithfully witnessing people.'¹⁰² For the reasons stated, the missiological prospects to be drawn from Lindbeck's work are less than sanguine.¹⁰³

(ii) *Stanley Hauerwas*

Stanley Hauerwas, whose work is much influenced by Lindbeck, proceeds along similar lines to those of his mentor.¹⁰⁴ As an ethicist, he is deeply concerned with the fact that the Christian community must develop its own ethical values. His conviction is that the Church has become too sympathetic with certain characteristic Enlightenment emphases and has thus compromised her calling as a witness to the gospel. In particular, he argues that the Enlightenment tradition has afflicted the Christian tradition with some of the more cynical aspects of 'liberal democracy'. He therefore sets out the parameters

¹⁰⁰ Lindbeck 1984: 133.

¹⁰¹ Lindbeck 1989a: 193.

¹⁰² Lindbeck 1989a: 194.

¹⁰³ For his most developed comments on the missiological implications of his work, see Lindbeck 1989b. For his understanding of ecclesiology (founded very clearly on a developed notion of 'election'), which leads him to a 'passive' understanding of mission, see Lindbeck 1989a, and 1990. It is noteworthy that Newbigin's similar commitment to the notion of 'election' leads him in a much more positive missiological direction (see e.g., Newbigin's comments on election in 1982c: 133; and the chapter ('The Logic of Election') in 1989f: 80-88). For a critique of Lindbeck's position in missiological and apologetic terms, cf. Gustafson's article (Gustafson 1985), who concludes that: 'It seems that the future of Christianity lies, for Lindbeck, in being a cognitively dissonant sectarian movement: its identity and authenticity demand this' (86). For a more general critique, see McGrath 1990: 14-34.

¹⁰⁴ For his indebtedness to Lindbeck, see e.g., Hauerwas 1985: 1-9.

within which the Christian community must now develop its own social, theological, and ethical identity. His foundational premise – as set out, for example, in his 1991 book *After Christendom?* – is that ‘Christian discourse must first be written by Christians for Christians’.¹⁰⁵ He goes on to summarise his argument as follows:

In brief, I argue that Christian adherence to foundationalist epistemologies – that is, the kind of position we find exemplified in thinkers such as Kant – was commensurate with social strategies of Christendom. Such social strategies were the attempt by Christians to create societies in which it would be possible to think that Christians believed what anyone would believe upon reflection. Ironically, this strategy turned Christianity into a set of beliefs to legitimate the false universalism of liberalism. In this book I challenge that strategy by reasserting the significance of the church as the embodiment of the necessary practices to sustain Christian affirmation of God as Trinity.¹⁰⁶

In pursuing such a programme, Hauerwas aims to sever the link with liberal democracy and seeks to reconstruct and validate a viable Christian narrative tradition that is ultimately bounded and legitimated *solely by its own assumptions*. Jettisoned in the process is the notion that the Enlightenment programme was able to supply some such neutral ground across the different traditions which could furnish the possibility of meaningful ethical interaction and discussion between them. In the contemporary context, he argues, the Christian community must revert to a legitimation of ethical positions which is supplied solely by an understanding and affirmation of its *own* narrative, and should accordingly seek to develop its sense of identity without recourse to other starting points. As a result he writes: ‘I have learned that there is simply nothing

¹⁰⁵ Hauerwas 1991: 13. The book’s subtitle (‘How the Church is to behave if freedom, justice, and a Christian nation are bad ideas’) is significant.

¹⁰⁶ Hauerwas 1991: 15-16.

I can do to prevent my position from being characterized as fideistic and/or sectarian.’¹⁰⁷

As this position is developed, Hauerwas implicitly acknowledges that postmodernity has forced the Church into the recognition that it is the Christian community *alone* that is able to legitimate its beliefs and actions. This has to be the starting point for any possible ‘engagement’ with other narratives. Inevitably, the nature of such dialogue has to be analysed and then put into practice in the light of this presupposition about independence. Hauerwas remains ultimately unclear as to the level at which any such dialogue can be maintained. In his earlier book *Against the Nations* (1985), he insists that he ‘has no interest in legitimating and/or recommending a withdrawal of Christians or the Church from social or political affairs’.¹⁰⁸

But he is aware that the development of his position is potentially problematic when it comes to explicating the precise nature of the ‘dialogue’ between Church and society. Indeed, the opening pages of *After Christendom* describe astutely the dimensions of this dilemma. He concedes the fact that on the one hand the book’s framework is couched in the very terms of Enlightenment rationalism which *assumes* some common framework between Church and society. But on the other he argues that the substance of the book is nonetheless an attempt to undermine this connection by proposing that the Church must understand itself first of all on its own terms rather than those of the culture surrounding it. He admits:

¹⁰⁷ Hauerwas 1991: 16. See the rebuttal of his position in Gustafson 1985: 88f.; also Stiver 1994:98.

¹⁰⁸ Hauerwas 1985: 1.

I simply have to acknowledge that in fact there is no way of avoiding this awkward position; I do not want to avoid it. The call to acknowledge the significance of the church that is the hallmark of this book does not require an intellectual or social retreat. Rather the awkward position in which I believe the church and, thus I am in, requires that we serve liberal societies by challenging their alleged universalism and cosmopolitanism.¹⁰⁹

But how is this to be done when there is no common conceptual framework between ‘Church’ and ‘society’ to facilitate the process? For Hauerwas, the manner in which the Church is to legitimate its truth-claims in this context is one which appears to operate at different levels. Fundamentally, it represents a call to the ecclesial community to become a ‘witness’ to its *own* sense of divine calling, and by so doing to shine as a light in a dark world. Hauerwas’s elaboration of this notion of ‘witness’ reveals that what he has in mind is not that Christians should adopt an aggressive evangelistic stance, nor even that they should engage in verbal apologetics as a primary task. Indeed, it is difficult to see how such proactive methods could have a place in Hauerwas’s scheme – given his disgust at the Church’s sense of self-importance which he sees as one of the major identity problems inflicted by modernity. He himself raises the question in this way: ‘How can we be witnesses, how can we be educators, how can we communicate the gospel without explicitly or implicitly underwriting patterns of domination and violence antithetical to the Kingdom brought by Christ?’¹¹⁰

In contrast to this, Hauerwas’s line of argument – very similar in essence to that of Lindbeck – is that the Church’s ‘witness’ has to operate at an ethical and behavioural level, and that this in itself will constitute its only legitimate and

¹⁰⁹ Hauerwas 1991: 14.

¹¹⁰ Hauerwas 1991: 152.

authentic form of evangelism. Such witness will happen only as Christians acknowledge that the gospel is a story and as they begin more consistently and effectively to live out their lives in the power of that story.¹¹¹ In terms of intent, Christians cannot force others to allegiance, but can only pray.¹¹²

(iii) John Milbank

Finally, John Milbank is similarly influenced by the assumption that narratives become inevitably 'localised' by the advent of postmodernity. Like Hauerwas, he is concerned to defend Christianity's credentials on the framework of its own inherited tradition rather than by borrowing legitimising frameworks from other traditions. Furthermore, his too is a rejection of 'alien' narratives which in the past have cornered Christianity into a sense of self-perception which is not its own. 'The pathos of modern theology' he writes 'is its false humility'.

He continues:

For theology, this must be a fatal disease, because once theology surrenders its claim to be a meta discourse, it cannot any longer articulate the word of the creator God, but is bound to turn into the oracular voice of some finite idol, such as historical scholarship, humanist psychology, or transcendental philosophy.¹¹³

¹¹¹ E.g., Hauerwas 1981: 52, 96-7; 1991: 152. In taking this line, Hauerwas also adopts a communitarian view of the Bible, and a deconstructionist approach to texts more generally. For example, he argues that the meaning of Scripture cannot exist independently of a community's 'interpretative strategies'. 'There is simply no "real meaning" of Paul's letters to the Corinthians once we understand that they are no longer Paul's letters but the Church's Scripture' (Hauerwas 1993: 20). On this basis, the Bible's only valid interpretation arises therefore out of a prior apprenticeship *within* the community of faith (cf. 9). It is by definition impossible to show how on this basis the Bible can be used to communicate beyond the Church except through a community's witness to its own tradition. Cf. his earlier book (Hauerwas 1981): e.g., 52-55, 96-97.

¹¹² See esp. chapter 6 ('The Politics of Witness', 133-152) in Hauerwas 1991.

¹¹³ Milbank 1990b: 1.

‘What follows’ he argues, ‘is intended to overcome the pathos of modern theology, and to restore in postmodern terms, the possibility of theology as a meta discourse.’¹¹⁴

The following eleven chapters of his book are concerned therefore to distance theological narrative from descriptive self-definitions that are built upon alien presuppositions – whether sociological, psychological or philosophical. Christianity must be reconstructed on its own terms within the legitimating process supplied by the divine Word. He writes accordingly that:

Theology has frequently sought to borrow from elsewhere a fundamental account of society or history, and then see what theological insights will cohere with it. But it has been shown that no such fundamental account, in the sense of something neutral, rational and universal, is really available. It is theology itself that will have to provide its own account of the final causes at work in human history, on the basis of its own particular, and historically specific faith.¹¹⁵

What emerges is a redefinition of Christianity along lines suggestive of Lindbeck’s ‘cultural-linguistic’ model, but Milbank seeks to develop his thesis without falling prey to what he describes as Lindbeck’s tendency to present the Christian narrative in a way that is ‘artificially insulated . . . from its historical genesis’.¹¹⁶ Instead, Milbank puts forward a model of understanding Christianity which is marked by what he describes as ‘metanarrative realism’¹¹⁷ based on Augustine’s model of the ‘Two Cities’ set forward in his *Civitas Dei*. Rather than being defined in terms of ‘another’ narrative such as the social sciences, Milbank argues that theology is ‘itself a social science, and the queen of the

¹¹⁴ Milbank 1990b: 1.

¹¹⁵ Milbank 1990b: 380.

¹¹⁶ Milbank 1990b: 386.

¹¹⁷ Milbank 1990b: 382ff..

sciences for the inhabitants of the *altera civitas*, on pilgrimage through this temporary world.’¹¹⁸ He continues:

In this fashion a gigantic claim to be able to read, criticize, say what is going on in other human societies, is absolutely integral to the Christian Church, which itself claims to exhibit the exemplary form of human community. For theology to surrender this claim, to allow that other discourses – ‘the social sciences’ – carry out yet more fundamental readings, would therefore amount to a denial of theological truth. The *logic* of Christianity involves the claim that the ‘interruption’ of history by Christ and his bride, the Church, is the most fundamental of events, interpreting all other events.¹¹⁹

Thus, he writes that: ‘A re-reading of the *Civitas Dei* will allow us to realize that political theology can take its critique, both of secular society and of the Church, directly out of the developing Biblical tradition, without recourse to any external supplementation.’¹²⁰

Whereas Lindbeck’s aim could be described as an attempt to understand the Church in terms of its linguistic self-description, both Hauerwas and Milbank have developed particular applications of Lindbeck’s approach: Hauerwas in terms of ethics, and Milbank in terms of the Church’s societal and political dimensions. Nonetheless, as with Hauerwas, our particular interest at this point is the basis upon which Milbank is able to articulate the possibility of dialogue between the theological narrative of the Church and that of ‘traditions’ other than its own. Given his presuppositions, is such dialogue possible? Though Milbank never develops his thinking in strictly missiological terms, one would have to conclude that such strategies are at best ‘passive’. In this respect he resembles both Lindbeck and Hauerwas. So, for example, he writes that:

¹¹⁸ Milbank 1990b: 380.

¹¹⁹ Milbank 1990b: 388.

¹²⁰ Milbank 1990b: 389.

The task of such a theology is not apologetic, nor even argument. Rather it is to tell again the Christian *mythos*, pronounce again the Christian *logos* and call again for Christian *praxis* in a manner that restores their freshness and originality. It must articulate Christian difference in such a fashion as to make it strange.¹²¹

This sort of statement is unsurprising, given his articulation of a desire to establish the Christian narrative as the narrative *par excellence* from whose vantage point all other traditions must be judged. At the same time, it is unclear exactly what he has in mind when he uses words such as ‘pronounce’ or the expression ‘call again’. Precisely who is being addressed by such exhortations? Or in what sense would the ‘strangeness’ of the Church’s witness be something that would attract others? Even given this ambiguity, the weight of Milbank’s words suggests that the possibility of fruitful engagement with other traditions remains somewhat limited. Despite his desire therefore to distance himself from what he sees as Lindbeck’s inability to deal adequately with Christianity’s ‘historical’ moorings, it is difficult to see how Christians can engage with outsiders, or outsiders engage with Christian claims except on the basis of Christianity’s own language and self-understanding. As a result, there exists for Milbank – as for Lindbeck and Hauerwas – no universal language on offer to facilitate the process of apologetics and dialogue.

1.5 Conclusion: postmodernity, ‘legitimacy’ and mission

We have written more on Lindbeck, Hauerwas, and Milbank in the previous sections because Newbigin’s work lies roughly within their ‘terrain’. A

¹²¹ Milbank 1990b: 381. Note the title of his later book (Milbank 1997b) – *The Word Made Strange*.

prima facie reading of him suggests that he lays out his stall in a position which rejects postmodern disavowal of all notions of ‘truth’, but which also argues strongly against the ‘Enlightenment’ view that there remains a neutral and external vantage point from which to judge religious systems of thought by a series of universal and rational ‘axioms’.

The thesis will seek to explore the extent to which Newbigin’s position is itself sustainable within such an implied framework. For the issues raised by this preliminary survey are crucial for him – as for any would-be missiologist who is concerned not simply with the survival of Christianity but also with its growth and expansion. Therefore the conclusions of those who advocate that ‘truth’ can be publicly known and owned need to be founded upon presuppositions which are ‘transportable’ across the postmodern boundaries surrounding ‘local’ communities and independent ‘narrative-traditions’. In an era in which, as Richard Rorty puts it, ‘we need . . . to throw out the last residues of the notion of “trans-cultural rationality”’,¹²² the question about the ‘commensurability’ of narratives is crucial for mission. Is the Christian tradition – in spite of Lindbeck’s self-descriptive analysis and Milbank’s emphasis on recovery and ‘meta-narrative’ – essentially now ‘marooned’ within its own linguistic boundaries?

We turn now to the work of Lesslie Newbigin for an analysis of his contribution to these questions. We will begin by outlining his diagnosis of Western culture.

¹²² Rorty 1985: 15.

Chapter Two

Newbigin and Western Culture: Diagnosis and Analysis

Introduction

The aims of the present chapter will be pursued in two ‘Parts’. In Part 1, we will outline the main contours of the diagnosis and critique of Western culture which Newbigin developed from the mid-seventies. Then in Part 2, we will proceed to suggest that the interpretative framework within which this diagnosis and critique are best understood is one which was inspired by Newbigin’s reading of the Hungarian philosopher Michael Polanyi.

In order to establish this thesis, we will begin by outlining Newbigin’s earlier use of Polanyi’s thought in the 1960s. This will form the background to a detailed exploration of Polanyi’s more extensive influence upon Newbigin’s later work – with special reference to Polanyi’s 1958 book *Personal Knowledge*. The argument about the particular indebtedness of Newbigin’s later missiology to the thought of Polanyi will be developed by means of a detailed analysis of Newbigin’s missiology – both in terms of its response to modernity, and also in terms of its consequent reconstruction of the task of mission.

As the thesis progresses, the argument about the influence of Polanyi will provide the interpretative context with which to commence an analysis of Newbigin’s work in relation to the issues raised in chapter 1. This discussion will

begin to emerge in the present chapter, but will become the more particular focus of the following two chapters.

Part 1 – Diagnosis: Newbigin and the Critique of the West

2.1 Introduction

Newbigin's thinking on the question of the 'crisis' facing both Church and Society in the West begins to take on a coherent shape with his 1983 book *The Other Side of 1984*, and is given further development in his two subsequent books *Foolishness to the Greeks*, and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (published in 1986 and 1989 respectively). Three factors seem to have been catalysts in stimulating Newbigin's thought on the subject.

The first was a profound sense of 'culture shock' which he experienced on returning to England in 1974 after thirty-six years of missionary service in India.¹ In the years that followed, he was frequently asked what was the greatest change that he noticed in the culture to which he was returning? In reply, the phrase he came to use was: 'The disappearance of hope.'² He continued: 'I believe that everyone who has made the same move will bear me out. Even in the most squalid slums of Madras there was always the belief that things could be improved . . . there was still the belief in a better future ahead.' By contrast:

¹ Newbigin records that the first impact of this began to strike home at 5.30am in Munich on 10 May 1974 following his land journey across Eastern Europe (1985e: 240).

² Newbigin 1983b: 1; cf. also 1989f: 232.

In England . . . it is hard to find any such hope. Apart from those whose lives are shaped by the Christian hope founded on the resurrection of Jesus as the pledge of a new creation, there is little sign among the citizens of this country of the sort of confidence in the future which was certainly present in the earlier years of this century.³

Secondly, in an article explaining how *The Other Side of 1984* came to be written,⁴ Newbigin refers to a remark made by General Simatoupong of Indonesia at a plenary session of the WCC's 'Salvation Today' conference held at Bangkok back in 1973.⁵ After making a contribution to one of the debates, the General (who was sitting next to Newbigin at the time) had whispered in his hearing: 'Of course the big question is, Can the West be converted?'⁶ Clearly, this comment lodged deeply in Newbigin's mind. Not only was it the thing he remembered most from the conference,⁷ but it clearly came to encapsulate in the form of a question the critical point of challenge for his later thinking. Not only was he subsequently to write an article with the General's question as its title,⁸ but in his other writings he makes explicit reference to the General's comment on no less than eleven occasions.⁹

Thirdly, the immediate precursor to the writing of *The Other Side of 1984* was the initiation in 1981 of a 'study process' initiated by the British Council of Churches with a view to a conference to be held in 1984.¹⁰ This process arose out of the sense that 1984 would be a year of symbolic significance in raising

³ Newbigin 1983b: 1.

⁴ Newbigin 1985c.

⁵ The conference was sponsored by the WCC's 'Commission on World Mission and Evangelism'. Newbigin occasionally *mistakes* its date as either 1971 (1990i: 162; Newbigin 1978b: 11 [also in 2nd edition - 1995c: 9]), or 1972 (1977e: 263; 1985e: 231 [also in 2nd edition - 1993g: 218-9]).

⁶ Newbigin 1985c: 6.

⁷ Newbigin 1990i: 162-3.

⁸ Newbigin 1987a.

⁹ Newbigin 1988e: 98, 108; 1989g: 1, 7, 14; 1990i: 162-3; 1990m: 136, 138, 145; 1994b: 66, 67.

¹⁰ For the background, see Newbigin 1985c.

questions about the future of society. It also coincided with Newbigin's own reflections on the need to work at the task of relating and applying the gospel to the various issues of public life. The questions that this perspective began to raise led him in turn to investigate the central dilemma which underlay them. As he was later to phrase the question: 'How can one find a perspective on one's own culture? . . . Could there be an Archimedean point, so to speak, from which one could look critically at one's own intellectual and spiritual formation?'¹¹

It was during this period of reflection in the early 1980s that Newbigin spent some time studying at the library of St. Deiniol's in Hawarden, North Wales. Here quite by chance, he came across the original French version of Paul Hazard's book *The European Mind: 1680-1715*.¹² Recalling the experience in his autobiography, he wrote:

The title was striking. It was a study of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, a subject about which I had never thought. . . . It seemed to provide the perspective I was looking for. Here was the critical moment in which one could say that, after a very long period of gestation, modern Europe came to birth and to consciousness of its own unique character.¹³

2.1.1 The influence of the Enlightenment

As a result of this, and the reading of 'other books on the period',¹⁴ Newbigin's sense of the Enlightenment as a cultural 'movement' begins to dominate his thinking, and also his cultural critique. Indeed, at the heart of his

¹¹ Newbigin 1993g: 250-1.

¹² Hazard 1973. The French original was published in 1935.

¹³ Newbigin 1993g: 251.

¹⁴ Referred to unspecifically in 1993g: 251.

thesis is a sustained critique of this culture – which he tends increasingly to describe as that of ‘modernity’.¹⁵

Newbigin traces the cultural malaise of this movement to certain critical assumptions which came to birth in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the ‘golden’ era of the ‘Enlightenment’. Here, he argues, are to be found the chronic flaws that have led to the crisis at the heart of our contemporary culture. The philosophers René Descartes and John Locke turn out to be the ‘villains’ of the piece. Together, argues Newbigin, they helped to establish a philosophical foundation for post-Enlightenment society in which the only propositions which could be regarded as properly ‘true’ were those which could be shown to be scientifically ‘provable’. In a 1988 article entitled ‘Our Missionary Responsibility in the Crisis of Western Culture’ he writes for example that:

Since Descartes, our culture has been dominated by the . . . search for a kind of knowledge that could not be doubted, a kind of knowledge that involved no risk, no faith commitment. The unquestionable and lucid certainties of mathematics were to provide the paradigm of real knowledge. In the English speaking world this was powerfully reinforced by the work of John Locke . . . who defined belief as what we fall back on when we do not have knowledge. Thus ‘I believe’ means ‘I do not know.’¹⁶

This attempt to establish as ‘true’ only those things which could be shown to be beyond doubt lies at the heart of what Newbigin understands to be the crisis confronting the culture of the West. From this foundation, he proceeds to illustrate what this means in contemporary society by drawing three distinctions –

¹⁵ Newbigin’s first use of this term (to my knowledge) is in 1977e: 264. He frequently uses it in his post-1983 writings, often as a way of describing contemporary culture – e.g., 1989i: 54: ‘it is part of the drift of contemporary Western culture (of what in every part of the world is called “modernity”)’; also, 1983b: 6; 1985d: 33; 1986b: 130; 1989e: 213; 1992l: 311 etc.; or as a means of highlighting its negative impact (often quoting Walter Lippmann’s phrase ‘the acids of modernity’); e.g., 1983b: 48; 1985c: 6; 1987a: 355; 1991b: 5; 1992h: 185; 1993e: 3; 1997a: 99.

¹⁶ Newbigin 1988e: 103.

or ‘dichotomies’ – which he traces back to this original fault-line.

(i) *The dichotomy between ‘facts’ and ‘values’*

In *Foolishness to the Greeks* he writes that a ‘strange fissure . . . runs right through the consciousness of modern Western man.’¹⁷ He continues:

. . . this fissure becomes visible in two ways: in the dichotomy (one of the outstanding marks of a ‘modern’ society) between the public and the private worlds, and in the dichotomy in thought between what are commonly called ‘facts’ and what are called ‘values.’ The public world is a world of facts that are the same for everyone, whatever his values may be; the private world is a world of values where all are free to choose their own values and therefore to pursue such courses of action as will correspond with them.¹⁸

The epistemological foundations originally established by Descartes and others have thus been successfully maintained in our post-Enlightenment culture. ‘Facts’ comprise those pieces of information and knowledge which are deemed worthy of inclusion in the sphere of ‘truth’ since they can be established by the methods of ‘scientific’ enquiry. All other claimants to this status must pass muster at the same bar of judgement if they are to be included in the realm of true ‘knowledge’. If successful, they achieve a universal status. If not, they remain at the level of personal choice, involving – in theory at least – a supposed liberty of conscience.

He enlarges on this point in the context of a discussion of ‘pluralism’ in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, as follows:

The principle of pluralism is not universally accepted in our culture. It is one of the key features of our culture, and one that we shall have to examine in some depth, that we make a sharp distinction between a world of what we call ‘values’ and a world of what we call ‘facts.’ In the former world we are pluralists; values

¹⁷ Newbigin 1986b: 35.

¹⁸ Newbigin 1986b: 35-36.

are a matter of personal choice. In the latter we are not; facts are facts, whether you like them or not.¹⁹

Newbigin develops this point elsewhere. For example, in relation to the educational curriculum, he writes that:

... in our society the things we affirm in the Christian creed are not regarded as 'facts'. They do not belong to the core curriculum in the public schools. They belong to the private world of 'values'. That every human being is shaped by the programme encoded in the DNA molecule is a 'fact' which every student is expected to know; it is part of the public education by which citizens are equipped to enter public life. But that every human being is made to glorify God and enjoy him for ever, and that every human being must in the end appear before the judgement seat of God is not a 'fact' which forms part of the curriculum. It belongs in the private sector.²⁰

The problem, as Newbigin outlines it, is that such a conception of 'truth' is severely limited. It may be able to establish the structure of DNA molecules, or to provide answers to a wide variety of mathematical problems, but in the end it will always remain unable to deal with the most significant questions of human identity and purpose: 'Who am I?', 'Why am I here?', or 'For what purpose was I created?'.²¹

The resulting 'rationalistic' stranglehold on the nature and content of truth has enormous consequences argues Newbigin. In the first place, once ultimate questions of 'purpose' are excluded, the only conceivable answers to the questions posed by the reality of human existence (which were once set within a religious framework) inevitably become conceived and answered in purely

¹⁹ Newbigin 1989f: 7 (cf. 15). For similar statements, cf.: 1988e: 100-1; 1989g: 3; 1993a: 82; 1995d: 26.

²⁰ Newbigin 1986a: 61. He develops a similar point in e.g., 1986b: 38-39, 67, 76; 1987a: 362; 1988e: 105; 1989f: 15, etc.; and at greater length in 1988f.

²¹ In this connection, he is fond of quoting with approval Einstein's saying, that, 'Insofar as the statements of mathematics are certain, they make no contact with reality; insofar as they make contact with reality, they are not certain' (e.g., Newbigin 1988e: 103-4. Also, 1990s: 7; 1991c: 5; 1993b: 346; 1995d: 75).

humanistic terms. Likewise, a purely scientific approach to the question of 'truth' tends to come to conclusions as to 'how' things operate, rather than 'why' they may do so. Once more, Newbigin traces this malaise to the foundations of the revolution in science which Isaac Newton and others laid in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He writes that:

At the risk of drastic oversimplification, one can say that the crucial decision was the decision to turn from asking questions about *purpose* to asking questions about *cause*; . . . from asking, 'What purpose does this serve?' to asking, 'How does it work?' Ancient Greek and medieval science asked about purpose; the new science asked about what makes things move. And, needless to say, the asking of that question has opened up enormous new vistas of both knowledge and power. But there is a price to pay. If one eliminates questions about purpose, then there is no way of finding a factual basis for values, no way of moving from the statement 'This is' to 'This is good.'²²

Once the idea of purpose is removed from the discussion, facts remain value-free, and it is at this level, argues Newbigin, that the scientific world-view operates.²³

(ii) *The dichotomy between 'knowing' and 'believing'*

Closely connected with the division between 'facts' and 'values' lies Newbigin's correlative distinction between the ideas of 'knowing' and 'believing'. Newbigin makes the connection between the two in the following

²² Newbigin 1988e: 101 (emphasis original). This analysis is significant not least because Newbigin combines two favourite themes of his: 'purpose' and 'epistemology'. In doing so he is influenced by Arend van Leeuwen's thesis (van Leeuwen 1964) that the Enlightenment has in effect replaced what he calls 'ontocracy' with 'technocracy'. Consequently, when individuals grapple with questions of 'identity' and 'purpose', they deal with them outside a framework of religious belief, and inevitably pursue humanistic answers. This inevitably leads the individual back to himself as the locus for any possible solution to the issues of life. The whole discipline of 'Science' has likewise tended to proceed along this 'technological' path – argues Newbigin – and has dealt only with questions and formulations whose very nature are evidence of the implicit assumption that the world in which we live is a 'man-made universe' (van Leeuwen's phrase, quoted in Newbigin 1966: 29).

²³ Newbigin 1986b: 36-7. Also 1987a: 362; 1988e: 102; 1990s: 3; 1995d: 56-7.

extract from a 1986 paper on ‘Conversion’:

When the Christian vision that had controlled the public life of Europe for 1,000 years was shattered in the religious wars of the seventeenth century, Europe sought another kind of security for the human mind than that which had been offered in the gospel. It sought it in a kind of knowledge which should be clear, exact and not open to doubt. From Descartes onwards, through many twists and turns, there has been this quest – to find a kind of certainty which cannot be doubted, a kind of knowledge about which one does not say ‘I believe’ (as the Christian says when he affirms the basis of his certainty), but, in the cool impersonal language of the scientific text-book: ‘These are the facts.’²⁴

But such ‘factual’ knowledge intrinsically excludes any sense of human involvement. Though ‘certainty’ may be its prized fruit, it is severely limited epistemologically, for it proceeds from what Newbigin describes as a ‘breakdown of the unity between the subjective and the objective poles of human knowing’.²⁵

Newbigin develops this analysis in order to demonstrate the essential disjunction produced at the heart of both individual and corporate life. It is characterised by the dichotomy between the epistemology of the scientific community under whose influence it is commonly perceived that one can *know* certain things to be true beyond doubt, and the epistemology of religious belief, which is perceived by wider society to fall well short of certainty. Expressions of ‘faith’ are therefore considered to be indicative of subjective preference rather than objective fact. ‘What is claimed to be knowledge but cannot be expressed in such “objective” terms is a matter of personal opinion’, he writes. ‘It is belief rather than knowledge, and, as Locke has taught us, belief is what we fall back upon when knowledge is not available.’²⁶ What results from this is an

²⁴ Newbigin 1986a: 63.

²⁵ Newbigin 1994d: 72.

²⁶ Newbigin 1994d: 72. Also, 1993a: 82; 1996c: 33.

epistemological duality at the heart of our ‘pluralist’ society which he describes as follows:

We are pluralist in respect of what we call beliefs but we are not pluralist in respect of what we call facts. The former are a matter of personal decision; the latter are a matter of public knowledge. The difficulty of maintaining this absolute distinction between knowing and believing has been illustrated in a number of recent cases which have been going through the United States courts up to the Supreme Court. In one case the proposal to teach creation along with evolution in the public schools has been declared illegal. One view of the origin, nature, and destiny of human beings may be taught in the public schools; another may not.²⁷

Whatever the results of this duality in the health of cultural life more generally,²⁸ Newbigin is clear that such a dichotomy leaves the would-be missionary in a fragile and seemingly helpless situation. For in attempting to engage in any form of gospel communication, he or she is held captive to the assumptions inherent in what Newbigin calls (following Peter Berger) a culture’s ‘reigning plausibility structure’.²⁹ Newbigin defines this concept as ‘a social structure of ideas and practices that create the conditions determining what beliefs are plausible within the society in question.’³⁰ The ‘reigning plausibility structure’ that has dominated contemporary Western culture since the Enlightenment denies that religious knowledge can be anything other than a private opinion, and as a result, that it has no validity as public truth.

Accordingly, he writes as follows:

²⁷ Newbigin 1989f: 27.

²⁸ Newbigin explores this with specific reference to education (1977f: 1988f), to politics (1981c), as well as to the idea of a ‘Christian Society’ (cf. the last chapter of 1986b, 1995b and 1995a). For an overview of these aspects of Newbigin’s thought, see Wainwright 2000: 256-269.

²⁹ E.g., Newbigin 1989f: 8 (also 10, 11, 12 etc.). See also the use of this phrase at: 1990c: 337; 1990m: 143; 1991f: 28; 1994d: 81; 1995d: 101. The influence of Peter Berger’s thinking on Newbigin at this point is explored in greater detail in chapter 3.

³⁰ Newbigin 1986b: 10 (note 1).

It follows that, in this culture, the Church and its preaching belong to the world of 'values'. . . . The Church is not generally perceived as concerned with facts, with the realities which finally govern the world and which we shall in the end have to acknowledge whether we like them or not. In this cultural milieu, the confident announcement of the Christian faith sounds like an arrogant attempt of some people to impose their values on others.³¹

If the gospel is therefore to be re-established as a rightful claimant to the status of 'truth', an urgent critique has to be mounted against the prevailing notion of epistemology endemic within contemporary culture. As he puts it:

The dichotomy between a world of so-called objective facts that can be 'scientifically' known apart from any faith commitment on the part of the knower and a world of beliefs that are solely the personal responsibility of the believer is precisely what has to be questioned in the light of the gospel.³²

(iii) *The dichotomy between 'reason' and 'revelation'*

The dichotomies between 'facts' and 'values', and between 'knowledge' and 'belief' are ultimately for Newbigin symptomatic of the deepest malaise that has been brought to birth by the Enlightenment project: the displacement of the primacy of 'revelation' by the elevation of the human faculty of 'reason'. This diagnostic perspective emerges clearly in the following quotation from *The Other Side of 1984* where Newbigin writes that:

At the centre of the movement which created our modern culture was a shift in the balance between faith and doubt. After a very long period in which the European perception of how things are was controlled by a dogma based on divine revelation, the principle of doubt reasserted itself in the famous phrase 'Dare to know'.³³

³¹ Newbigin 1989f: 7.

³² Newbigin 1986b: 50.

³³ Newbigin 1983b: 20.

Moreover, the reference here to Kant's famous dictum 'Dare to know' (*sapere aude*)³⁴ as the defining characteristic of this tendency established that at the heart of the Enlightenment project was a *rejection* of revelation as the ultimate source of authority. This was partly seen as a necessary stage in humanity's 'coming of age'. The 'Age of Reason', writes Newbigin:

... saw reason and revelation as mutually opposed and called upon human beings to be bold enough to use their reason, to put away a childish dependence on divine revelation, and to use the God-given gift of reason to establish the facts for themselves.³⁵

But in addition, the certainties of reason were thought to be superior to truth claims that were tied to revelation in the past. As he puts it elsewhere, if the quest 'is that of Descartes for a final certitude that admits of no possibility of doubt, for "eternal truths of reason" that are independent of contingent happenings in history – then the Bible is not the place to look.'³⁶

As a result of the change in relationship between 'revelation' and 'reason', the previously authoritative status of revelation was itself now brought under the judgement of reason, and found to be wanting. Newbigin develops the point as follows, arguing that:

The 'Age of Reason' supposed that there was available to human beings a kind of indubitable knowledge, capable of being grasped by all human beings which was more reliable than any alleged revelation, and which could therefore provide the criteria by which any alleged divine revelation could be assessed.³⁷

³⁴ From his 1784 essay 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (Kant 1983).

³⁵ Newbigin 1995d: 55.

³⁶ Cf. Newbigin 1996c: 70. The use of the concept of 'doubt' here is significant in locating his articulation of this theme within Polanyi's overall interpretative framework – as we will see – and refers to the tendency of Enlightenment thinkers to employ the faculty of 'reason' in order to establish truth claims that were thought to be immune from the possibility of doubt.

³⁷ Newbigin 1993f: 233.

Reason is hereby set over *against* revelation becoming in effect its ‘judge’.

In Newbigin’s programme the discussion of the relationship between these two ‘authorities’ is developed in an attempt to restore their proper relationship in a manner that does justice to the validity of both. The faculty of human reason is not to be jettisoned altogether. Nonetheless its role is to be re-established as an agency not superior to, but subordinate to that of revelation. Newbigin refers repeatedly in this context to the revolution in the conception of knowledge brought about by Augustine in the fifth century.³⁸ Accordingly, Newbigin argues that instead of understanding reason as the autonomous starting point for truth-discovery, post-Enlightenment culture must rediscover Augustine’s presupposition of ‘faith’ as the only legitimate basis from which to find truth. ‘Faith’ he argues is therefore ‘not a terminus but a starting point from which understanding can begin. This model is offered for acceptance by faith as the way to understanding. Its motto is *Credo ut intelligam*, I believe in order that I may understand.’³⁹

2.1.2 The question of epistemology

It will be clear from the foregoing analysis that the issue of ‘epistemology’ is of critical importance to Newbigin’s analysis of contemporary culture. This concern derives ultimately from his fundamental commitment to

³⁸ Newbigin returns to this theme repeatedly. Cf. e.g., 1986a: 62; 1986b: 70-1, 102-3; 1988c: 161; 1989f: 48; 1990s: 6; 1991f: 30-1; 1993b: 340; 1994d: 61; 1995d: 9.

³⁹ Newbigin 1983b: 24. He also uses the biblical text of Proverbs 9:10 (‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’) in a similar way to the phrase *Credo ut intelligam* in his later writings. E.g., 1996c: 10 where, referring to the Proverbs text, he says that ‘If fully understood . . . this small sentence would be seen to be subversive of the central thrust of modernity’. Cf. also, 1995d: 96.

the gospel as ‘public’ truth: that is, that the Christian account of the human story matters because it carries universal validity and significance. He states this position in the following words from *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*:

We believe that the truth about the human story has been disclosed in the events which form the substance of the gospel. We believe, therefore, that these events are the real clue to the story of every person, for every human life is part of the whole human story and cannot be understood apart from that story.⁴⁰

It is therefore a matter of prime importance to Newbigin how people come to *know* that the gospel is true, for unless a solid epistemological foundation can be established for religious knowledge, the future of the gospel within the belief structure of Western society is seriously jeopardised. He writes characteristically as follows:

How then can we know what is real, how do we come to know the truth? If ‘truth’ is not confined to the world of ‘facts’ alone, or of ‘values’ alone, how do the two relate and how can we know anyway? How can we put both sides of the brain together? These are questions of epistemology.⁴¹

In the light of this, he writes as follows:

At the most basic level there is need for critical examination from a Christian standpoint of the reigning assumptions in epistemology (How do we know what we claim to know?) and in history (How do we understand the story of which we are parts?).⁴²

Newbigin traces the ‘fault-lines’ within contemporary culture to this *epistemological* diagnosis from a wide variety of starting points: whether it be discussions of the legal wrangling over the presuppositions of the American

⁴⁰ Newbigin 1989f: 127.

⁴¹ Newbigin 1989g: 5.

⁴² Newbigin 1989e: 214.

education system,⁴³ questions about the Welfare State,⁴⁴ the possibility of a ‘free’ society,⁴⁵ the dilemma of pluralism,⁴⁶ or the challenge of inter-religious ‘dialogue’.⁴⁷

Moreover, it is significant that he sees this epistemological crisis as existing not only within the wider culture, but also within the Church itself, evidenced by the opposition between ‘fundamentalists’ and ‘liberals’ as a result of their respective approaches to the Bible. He refers to this as the ‘tragic split within Christendom’,⁴⁸ but reiterates elsewhere that: ‘this split is merely a surface manifestation of this more fundamental split, namely the split between fact and value, . . . the most distinctive feature of this peculiar culture of ours.’⁴⁹ As is the case within the wider culture, the fundamental cause of this is once more to be diagnosed as essentially ‘epistemic’. For it is ‘only through a resolute assault on the fundamental problem which is epistemology, the way we formulate an answer to the question: “How do you know?”’, that healing between the two parties may hope to be achieved.’⁵⁰

Moreover, it is evident that the particular emphasis upon ‘epistemology’ becomes central only within Newbigin’s later missiology, as compared to a comparative neglect within his earlier work. For example, his use of the

⁴³ Newbigin 1988f: 192: ‘I am concerned to suggest that these legal battles are not a laughing matter, but are a symptom of breakdown in our culture, a breakdown at the fundamental point of epistemology, of the answer we must give to the question: “How do you know?”’ Cf. also 1977f.

⁴⁴ Newbigin 1985f, esp. 175-76, 180.

⁴⁵ Newbigin 1990e.

⁴⁶ Newbigin 1988c: 159: ‘it is one of the marks of contemporary European thought that there is a profound skepticism about the possibility of knowing the truth. Indeed pluralism is celebrated as the proper social implication of the fact that truth is unknowable.’

⁴⁷ Newbigin 1993f: esp. 51: ‘I make this point . . . to illuminate what seems to me to be the central issue in this whole debate; it is the abandonment of the belief that it is possible to know the truth.’

⁴⁸ Newbigin 1989f: 24-5.

⁴⁹ Newbigin 1991c: 8.

⁵⁰ Newbigin 1989f: 24-5.

‘*epistem-*’ word-group occurs fifty-three times after 1974 as opposed to only once prior to this time.⁵¹ Three questions therefore naturally present themselves.

Firstly, where does the emphasis upon epistemology come from? Secondly, how does it fit into the wider context of Newbigin’s thought? Thirdly, why does it become so significant at this period in Newbigin’s life? These questions call for greater analysis than has previously been given, and it is to them that we now turn.

Part 2 – Analysis: Polanyi as the Hermeneutical ‘Key’ to Newbigin’s Thought

2.2 Introduction

There have been a number of assessments of Newbigin’s work that have sought to analyse his engagement with Western culture in similar form to that presented in Part 1 of this chapter. Many of these have made reference to the influence of Michael Polanyi’s thought but – as yet – there has been no sustained analysis of this influence.

George Hunsberger, for example, mentions Polanyi only twice in his recent major study of Newbigin’s work.⁵² This is surprising – even given the fact

⁵¹ Newbigin 1966: 60, where he refers to the ‘solipsist epistemology’ that denies the reality of the outside world. Of course, this observation does not take into account the more *general* discussions of epistemological ‘themes’ in earlier works where the word is not specifically used (e.g., his discussion about the knowledge of God in 1966: 77-99), but the increasing incidence of the ‘*epistem-*’ word-group does indicate a more specific attention to the issue of epistemology *per se* in the later writings.

⁵² Hunsberger 1998a: 56, 64.

that Hunsberger's work concentrates on Newbigin's writings in the period up to the publication of *Foolishness to the Greeks* in 1986. For it is clear that Polanyi's thought had by then already become highly significant in the formulation of Newbigin's ideas.⁵³

Similarly, Geoffrey Wainwright makes a number of references to Polanyi's influence upon Newbigin in his recent magisterial book *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life*,⁵⁴ but does not offer a sustained development of these, nor draw conclusions from them with regard to the shaping of Newbigin's thought. The same neglect may be noted in various articles giving an overview of his thought. Wilbert Shenk, for example, in a retrospective article setting out 'the characteristics that distinguish his work', makes no mention at all of Polanyi's influence.⁵⁵

We will argue in the remainder of this chapter that Polanyi's influence upon Newbigin is much greater than has previously been estimated. We will explore this in three ways.

Firstly, we will establish the early impact of Polanyi's thought on Newbigin's ideas in the sixties.

Secondly, we will carry out a detailed examination of Polanyi's 1958 book *Personal Knowledge* in order to demonstrate that from the mid-seventies Newbigin's later missiology shows a more substantial reliance upon Polanyi's

⁵³ Newbigin refers to Polanyi seven times in *Foolishness to the Greeks*, and Polanyi's work is highly significant in his earlier book *The Other Side of 1984* (where he is quoted at length six times, and referred to sixteen times). See also Newbigin's acknowledgement of his impact at this period in 1985c: 8; 1985d: 33-34. Moreover, as the thesis will show, Polanyi is also highly significant to the development of Newbigin's thought at two earlier stages: in the mid-sixties (see 1966: 77-99); and again (following fresh study) from the mid-seventies (see e.g., 1977f: 84-87; 1977a: 253; 1979c: 112).

⁵⁴ Wainwright 2000.

⁵⁵ Shenk 2000: 59-64 (quotation from 59).

framework of thought.

Thirdly, in order to establish this thesis, we will develop an analysis of Newbigin's material which incorporates two interlocking arguments. On the one hand, we will argue that in addition to the influence of Polanyi's thinking upon Newbigin's *philosophical* thought, Polanyi's *cultural* diagnosis of the West also becomes critically central to Newbigin's material. In tandem with this, we will argue that Newbigin's later missiological agenda is indebted not only to Polanyi's 'deconstructive' approach, but also that Newbigin's re-appraisal of a missionary engagement with the West is similarly informed by a 'reconstructive' application of Polanyi's ideas.

In the two following chapters, Polanyi's influence will be further explored in order to establish both its positive and negative impact upon Newbigin's engagement with modernity and postmodernity

2.2.1 Michael Polanyi

Michael Polanyi (1891-1976) was Hungarian by birth and was much influenced by the suppression of free scientific enquiry that he had encountered under the communist regime there.⁵⁶ He came to Britain as Professor of Physical Chemistry at Manchester University in 1933 and devoted much of his life thereafter to the investigation of the nature of scientific enquiry and to the epistemic status of its 'truth' claims. This enquiry into areas of 'philosophical' –

⁵⁶ See e.g. his 1966 essay, 'The Message of the Hungarian Revolution' (in Polanyi 1969: 24-39). For an analysis of this background under communism, see Prosch 1986: chapters 1 and 2. For further biographical details see Scott 1985: 1-13. Scott's book was later republished by SPCK under the title *Michael Polanyi* (Scott 1996) and is a helpful general overview to Polanyi's thought. For a more thorough critical appraisal see Prosch 1986.

rather than strictly ‘scientific’ – notions of truth began increasingly to dominate his published output from the mid-1940s.⁵⁷ This new phase in his career was launched by the publication of *Science, Faith and Society* in 1946,⁵⁸ after which Manchester University created a special ‘Chair of Social Studies’ for him.

With no formal teaching responsibilities attached to this post, Polanyi took the opportunity to enter more fully into these philosophical interests, and they culminated in the Gifford Lectures in 1951-2, which were later published as *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* in 1958.⁵⁹ This is the book most often referred to by Newbigin,⁶⁰ although he also makes occasional reference to other works by Polanyi.⁶¹ Polanyi’s published output, mainly in the area of scientific research, was nothing short of prolific.⁶² His wider influence has been profound, leading Harry Prosch (the co-author of Polanyi’s last book *Meaning*) to describe him as, ‘a man whose breadth and depth of mind leave one with a sense of respect approaching awe and whose work must certainly be destined to leave an indelible mark upon the direction thought will take as it moves on toward the twenty-first century’.⁶³

⁵⁷ He was later to write: ‘I believe that I came into my true vocation in 1946 when I set out on the pursuit of a new philosophy to meet the needs of our age’ (Quoted in Scott 1985: 4).

⁵⁸ Republished as Polanyi 1964.

⁵⁹ Polanyi 1958.

⁶⁰ Some forty-three times specifically, amongst a total of some 222 references to Polanyi’s thought.

⁶¹ E.g., he refers specifically to Polanyi 1966 (in Newbigin 1995d: 62); Polanyi 1969 (in Newbigin 1988c: 168, and 1989f: 43); and Polanyi 1965 (in a footnote in Newbigin 1988g: 153) though in this last case it is not clear to which part of the article the footnote refers.

⁶² For a bibliography of his social and philosophical writings up to 1968, see the list drawn up by Richard Gelwick in Langford and Poteat 1968: 432-446; for a more recent listing, covering scientific publications as well as his philosophical and social writings, see Prosch 1986: 319-346. Most important for our purposes are his books in the area of epistemology: Polanyi 1958; 1959; 1964; 1966; 1967. See also the articles: 1961 and 1967; and the collection edited by Marjorie Grene (1969). His last published book was a collaboration with Harry Prosch based on lectures which Polanyi had given in Chicago in 1969 (Polanyi and Prosch 1975).

⁶³ Prosch’s preface to Polanyi and Prosch 1975: xi.

Newbigin had first come across Polanyi's writings after the publication of Polanyi's major treatise, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, in 1958. His friend J.H. Oldham had been encouraging him for many years to engage with the thought of the Hungarian philosopher,⁶⁴ and Newbigin was immediately impressed with the book. Indeed, he resolved thereafter to reread it every ten years, and commented in the 1990s that he had certainly 'read it several times since'.⁶⁵

(i) Early influence

Newbigin's first published engagement with Polanyi's ideas came in his 1966 book *Honest Religion for Secular Man*.⁶⁶ We will outline this engagement at this point in the argument for two reasons. Firstly, it will indicate the dimensions of Newbigin's indebtedness to Polanyi in the sixties, well before Newbigin's return from India. Secondly, it will provide the background against which to interpret Newbigin's later and more substantial engagement with Polanyi from the mid-seventies, which we explore in the following sections.

Newbigin's 1966 book addresses the impact of the spreading reality of 'secularisation' in the early sixties. Within this increasingly secularised context he devotes the whole of the third chapter to the question, 'What does it mean to

⁶⁴ Oldham had first met Polanyi in 1944 and corresponded with him until Oldham's death in 1969. Polanyi also participated in Oldham's intellectual discussion groups (originally called 'The Moot') for about sixteen years. This is doubtless the background to Oldham's recommendation of Polanyi to Newbigin. Note Polanyi's dedication of Polanyi 1959 to Oldham. In a 1962 interview Polanyi said that, other than his experience as a scientist, his participation in 'The Moot' was the most significant influence upon his thought (Gelwick 1965: 11, note 8). For a history of 'The Moot', see Clements 1993. For Newbigin's own contribution of a paper to the gathering see Turner 1998, 8.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Wainwright 2000: 22.

⁶⁶ Newbigin 1966.

speak of knowing God?’⁶⁷ He prefaces his discussion with the statement:

‘Readers of *Personal Knowledge* by Michael Polanyi . . . will recognize in what follows my debt to this book.’⁶⁸

Newbigin proceeds to make a total of seven points in his discussion about ‘knowing God’. These are (1) that ‘all knowing is a skill’;⁶⁹ (2) that ‘knowing is an activity of persons in community’;⁷⁰ (3) that ‘(k)nowing involves a risk and a commitment’;⁷¹ (4) that ‘neither in ordinary speech nor in the speech of the Bible are “faith” and “knowledge” synonymous’;⁷² (5) that ‘there are realities which we *know* by faith’ and that knowledge of other people is a clear example of this;⁷³ (6) that ‘our language about knowing God is to be interpreted in terms of what we have described as personal knowledge’;⁷⁴ and (7) that ‘(p)ersonal knowledge depends upon mutual trust’.⁷⁵

Points 1-3 are more generalised statements about the nature of knowing, whilst point 4 forms a connecting bridge to the specific question of *religious* knowing which he addresses in points 5-7.

In analysing this material, two observations may be made. Firstly, there is a measure of continuity to be found with Newbigin’s previous thinking on the subject of knowledge. For example, the ‘personal’ dimension to religious knowing had been a central component in Newbigin’s approach to the question since his days as a theological student in Cambridge in the thirties. For example,

⁶⁷ Newbigin 1966.

⁶⁸ Newbigin 1966: 80 (note 1).

⁶⁹ Newbigin 1966: 80.

⁷⁰ Newbigin 1966: 80.

⁷¹ Newbigin 1966: 81.

⁷² Newbigin 1966: 84.

⁷³ Newbigin 1966: 86 (emphasis original).

⁷⁴ Newbigin 1966: 87.

⁷⁵ Newbigin 1966: 93.

in the introduction to a 1936 essay on 'Revelation', he had written:

In a preliminary consideration of the subject we may fairly say that the central importance ascribed to revelation in Christianity depends upon two beliefs about the nature of the world and of man. Firstly the belief that the meaning of the world is personal. For if the final meaning of the world is less than personal, then it [is] best understood by those methods of scepticism and experiment which are the requisites of scientific enquiry, but which would be the complete destruction of any personal understanding. For we know a person only as he chooses to reveal himself, and only as our own spirit is sensitive and trustful to respond to his revelation, and if the meaning of the world is personal then revelation is the only path by which it can be made known to us.⁷⁶

These words demonstrate that the epistemological convictions he was later to encounter in Polanyi's writings were conducive to a way of thinking that he had already espoused.

Nonetheless, Newbigin's reading of *Personal Knowledge* can be shown to have introduced new elements into his thinking as expressed in *Honest Religion*. When Newbigin therefore writes that readers of Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* will recognize his 'debt to this book', it becomes evident that each of Newbigin's points can be shown to have been either directly inspired by Polanyi's book, or at least have been influenced by its arguments. One can briefly sketch these connections in the following ways.

In Newbigin's first point for example, the understanding that 'all knowing is a skill' forms one part of Newbigin's case that knowledge is rightly to be understood as 'personal'. He writes accordingly that: 'Knowledge does not impose itself upon us - at any stage. It is acquired by being learned, and it is learned by acquiring the skills necessary to carry through the mental operations involved in learning.'⁷⁷ This finds direct derivation from Polanyi's view that

⁷⁶ Quoted in Hunsberger 1998a: 57.

⁷⁷ Newbigin 1966: 80.

knowing is a ‘skill’ dependent upon a set of ‘learned’ and ‘inarticulate’ elements which become internalized in the personality as part of the process of human development.⁷⁸ As Polanyi puts it: ‘. . . *skilful performance is achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are not known as such to the person following them.*’⁷⁹

Newbigin’s second point – that ‘knowing is an activity of persons in community’ – is a direct application of Polanyi’s notion of ‘conviviality’.⁸⁰ So when Newbigin states for example that, ‘All progress in knowledge depends upon the existence of a community of persons who share their experience and who mutually trust one another to accept certain standards’;⁸¹ or that, ‘One cannot even speak a sentence without accepting provisionally the framework of thought which this language expresses and which is itself the result of the particular history of the people who speak it’;⁸² he is adopting central Polanyian notions about the ‘generational’ transmission of human cultural traditions via language. Polanyi summarises this process in his statement that: ‘The combined action of authority and trust which underlies both the learning of language and its use for carrying messages, is a simplified instance of a process which enters into the whole transmission of culture to succeeding generations.’⁸³

Newbigin’s third point is similarly indebted to Polanyi’s thought. First of all, Newbigin’s propositional statement that ‘Knowing involves a risk and a commitment’ is a direct adoption of Polanyi’s idea of a personal *commitment* to

⁷⁸ Cf. e.g., Polanyi 1958: esp. 49-63; also, 70-1, 88, 90.

⁷⁹ Polanyi 1958: 49 (emphasis original). Newbigin uses Polanyi’s example of riding a bicycle as an example of such a learnt skill (Newbigin 1966: 80 = Polanyi 1958: 49-50, 88).

⁸⁰ Polanyi 1958: esp. 203-245.

⁸¹ Newbigin 1966: 81.

⁸² Newbigin 1966: 81.

⁸³ Polanyi 1958: 207, in the context of the chapter on ‘Conviviality’ (203-245).

the kind of knowledge one acquires. He notes, for example, that all seemingly objective statements require ‘to be accompanied by the utterance of a personal commitment in order that they may become the content of an assertion.’⁸⁴

In addition Newbigin follows his own initial proposition about knowledge as ‘commitment’ with the statement, that:

It involves the acceptance, at least provisionally, of beliefs which might be mistaken. One cannot even speak a sentence without accepting provisionally the framework of thought which this language expresses and which is itself the result of the particular history of the people who speak it.⁸⁵

This mirrors Polanyi’s convictions about the conceptual and traditional context in which knowledge is acquired. For example, he writes as follows:

In learning to speak, every child accepts a culture constructed on the premises of the traditional interpretation of the universe, rooted in the idiom of the group to which it was born, and every intellectual effort of the educated mind will be made within this frame of reference.⁸⁶

Newbigin’s fourth point (that ‘neither in ordinary speech nor in the speech of the Bible are “faith” and “knowledge” synonymous’) is developed in terms of the specific example of the scientist’s findings. In this context, he writes that:

The result of our scientist’s research may be such that in due course it becomes part of what is regarded as assured knowledge. It goes into the textbooks and becomes the basis for further research. Yet, in spite of the fact that it is in this sense regarded as ‘knowledge’, our scientist knows that it is perfectly possible that in a few years’ time it will be superseded as the result of further research.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Polanyi 1958: 29. Also 59-62.

⁸⁵ Newbigin 1966: 81.

⁸⁶ Polanyi 1958: 112.

⁸⁷ Newbigin 1966: 85.

Again, the influence of Polanyi's discussions – which are consistently built around the practices of scientists, and more generally around what he calls the 'Republic of Science' – is clear.⁸⁸

Points five to seven of Newbigin's discussion can be said to build on his own pre-existing approach to the conception of 'personal knowing'. Yet here, it is significant that he now begins to use Polanyi's characteristic catch-phrase, 'personal knowledge' in developing his own ideas. As he characteristically puts it at one point in the discussion: '... our language about knowing God is to be interpreted in terms of what we have described as personal knowledge'.⁸⁹ In fact Newbigin uses this phrase ten times in the section under review.⁹⁰ Moreover, within this context there is now a more robust perspective on the epistemological *surety* of knowledge that is acquired by faith. He expresses this in point five, where he states that: 'It is difficult to deny there are realities which we *know* by faith.'⁹¹

From this brief survey of Newbigin's 1966 book, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, it is clear that his references to Polanyi's ideas demonstrate two things. Firstly, Polanyi's thinking was conducive to Newbigin's own ideas about the 'personal' nature of religious knowledge and the mutual trust involved in

⁸⁸ Note in particular the similarities between Newbigin's example (1966: 85) and the discussion in Polanyi about relativity theory (1958: 9-14). Newbigin had earlier referred to this part of Polanyi's book in connection with point three (1966: 83). For Polanyi's concept of the 'Republic of Science', see e.g., the essay of this title in Polanyi 1969 (49-72). For Newbigin's later references to it, cf. Newbigin 1988c: 168; 1989d: 1; 1991f: 57-58; 1991c: 4.

⁸⁹ Newbigin 1966: e.g., 87. Newbigin had not used the phrase in this context prior to his reading of Polanyi's book.

⁹⁰ Newbigin 1966: 86, 87(x2), 88(x3), 93(x3), 98 (cf. also 74).

⁹¹ Newbigin 1966: 86 (emphasis original). Cf. Newbigin's 'Foreword' to the republication of Drusilla Scott's book on Polanyi (Newbigin 1996a), where he emphasises this aspect of Polanyi's contribution, and writes: 'After speaking of the personal participation of the knower in the act of knowing, [Polanyi] goes on: "But this does not make our understanding *subjective*. Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience but a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed *objective* in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality"' (quoting from Polanyi 1958: vii-viii).

coming to an appreciation of God which he had first articulated years earlier as a theological student.⁹² At the same time they show, secondly, that Newbigin's reading of Polanyi had now added further dimensions to this perspective. Not only is there a stronger sense of the 'objectivity' of the knowledge acquired by faith, but Newbigin has also added three related notions: that the acquiring of knowledge involves the acknowledgement of 'apprenticeship' within a tradition of knowing; that it involves both personal 'commitment' and 'risk'; and that it is only within a living community that the legitimation and transmission of such knowledge can take place.

(ii) *Later influence*

If the writings of Michael Polanyi were already significant in Newbigin's thinking by the mid-sixties, we will proceed now to argue that their subsequent influence upon Newbigin's writings resulted from Newbigin's critical re-reading of Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* around the mid-seventies.

Characteristic of this newer 'reading' is his 1977 article, 'Teaching Religion in a Secular Plural Society',⁹³ which represents both an early attempt to address the urgent cultural questions that confronted Newbigin on his return from India in 1974, but also shows the earliest evidence of what we might call the 'newer reading' of Polanyi. Here Newbigin makes the critical Polanyian connection between the need for an 'epistemological' renewal, and the fact that the edifice of the entire Enlightenment project is on the point of collapse. The

⁹² The most influential in his days as a student was John Oman (see 1966: 10; and 1989f: 40). Cf. also the anecdote in Hunsberger 1998a: 57-58.

⁹³ Newbigin 1977f.

significance of the resulting ‘alliance’ between ‘epistemological’ and ‘cultural’ critiques in Newbigin’s later missiological work is hard to overestimate.

In the article itself, Newbigin discusses the meaning of the term ‘secular’ and its relationship to questions of religious education. Whilst the word ‘secular’ implies that the teaching of religion is pursued from the vantage point of a detached objectivity, Newbigin argues that that this cannot be the case. He continues:

We in this part of the world have been living for so long on the inherited capital of a thousand years of Christendom that we do not really know, and can hardly imagine what would happen if the process of burning this up was carried right through to its logical conclusion, if we had a society which did not accept any of the values which we have inherited from this past.⁹⁴

It is in this context that he first refers to Polanyi’s *cultural* analysis. He writes: ‘I am haunted by a paragraph from Michael Polanyi which I think has much relevance to our subject.’⁹⁵ The paragraph he proceeds to quote extensively is from the Part Three of *Personal Knowledge*, and is as follows:

‘The critical movement, which seems to be nearing the end of its course today, was perhaps the most fruitful effort ever sustained by the human mind. The past four or five centuries, which have gradually destroyed or overshadowed the whole mediaeval cosmos, have enriched us mentally and morally to an extent unrivalled in any period of similar duration. But its incandescence has fed on the combustion of Christian heritage in the oxygen of Greek rationalism, and when this fuel was exhausted the critical framework itself burnt away.’⁹⁶

Newbigin later describes this passage as a ‘crucial point in the long argument’ of the book,⁹⁷ and finds in it a new perspective on the nature of the cultural crisis facing the West which begins to influence his subsequent

⁹⁴ Newbigin 1977f: 84.

⁹⁵ Newbigin 1977f: 84.

⁹⁶ Newbigin 1977f: 85, the entire quotation coming from Polanyi 1958: 265-6.

⁹⁷ Newbigin 1993b: 347.

missiological writing.⁹⁸ Indeed, in many of his major works after the mid-seventies, this same passage recurs, occupying a position of central importance in the exposition, either being quoted directly (sometimes in full⁹⁹), or else specifically referred to at a significant point in the argument.¹⁰⁰ This new insight into Polanyi's material becomes crucial to Newbigin's subsequent writing.

2.3 Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* and Newbigin's later missiology

We turn therefore to examine in more detail the influence of Polanyi's book *Personal Knowledge* upon Newbigin's later thought. Newbigin was to write in 1996 that although it '... is not easy reading', nonetheless, 'I believe that Polanyi's work is of great importance, not least to those who are trying to commend the Christian faith to a sceptical generation.'¹⁰¹ As we chart the course of Newbigin's later indebtedness to this book, we will argue that Polanyi's thought not only influences Newbigin as he engages more specifically with the missiological questions facing Western culture from the mid-1970s, but is also intrinsically related to the way in which he responds to them.

The book itself is divided into four parts, each of which contributes complementary perspectives to Polanyi's 'post-critical' reconstruction of epistemology. 'Part One' outlines a basic approach to 'The Art of Knowing';¹⁰²

⁹⁸ In tracing the contours of this evaluation of the Enlightenment, it was Polanyi's book which critically helped Newbigin to interpret its demise, just as it was Paul Hazard's book (Hazard 1973), along with that of Basil Willey (Willey 1962) which gave him insights into its beginning (see the references in Newbigin 1983b: 8-9; 1985c: 7; and 1993g: 250-1).

⁹⁹ E.g., 1983b: 21; 1995c: 28; 1995d: 48.

¹⁰⁰ E.g., 1988e: 106; 1989g: 6; 1991f: 20; 1993b: 347; 1995d: 52.

¹⁰¹ Newbigin 1996a: iv.

¹⁰² Polanyi 1958: 1-65.

‘Part Two’ deals with the ‘Tacit Component’ of such knowledge;¹⁰³ ‘Part Three’ deals with what Polanyi calls ‘The Justification of Personal Knowledge’;¹⁰⁴ and ‘Part Four’ (‘Knowing and Being’) draws out concluding themes from the substance of the book and applies them to related areas of human life.¹⁰⁵

As we saw earlier, it was during the period of the 1970s that a concentration upon material in ‘Part Three’ of Polanyi’s book becomes crucial to Newbigin’s thinking. Our analysis of Newbigin’s engagement with the book will start here, therefore, because it helps to locate the ‘sparking point’ in Polanyi’s writing so far as Newbigin’s analysis of the West is concerned. Later we shall return to the earlier material in the book in order to argue not only that Polanyi’s diagnosis, but also his response to the diagnosis is significant for the development of Newbigin’s later missiology.

2.3.1 The crisis of Western culture

Polanyi’s thesis in ‘Part Three’ of *Personal Knowledge* is that the demise of the Enlightenment ‘movement’ is integrally linked to its central weakness: that it ‘offers no scope for our most vital beliefs’, but rather ‘forces us to disguise them in farcically inadequate terms.’¹⁰⁶ In responding to this, Polanyi argues that in order to restore what he describes as ‘the balance of our cognitive powers’, it is to the example of Augustine in the fourth century that we should now be looking.¹⁰⁷ By emphasising Augustine’s dictum: *nisi credideritis, non intelligitis*

¹⁰³ Polanyi 1958: 67-245.

¹⁰⁴ Polanyi 1958: 247-324.

¹⁰⁵ Polanyi 1958: 325-405.

¹⁰⁶ Polanyi 1958: 265.

¹⁰⁷ Polanyi 1958: 266.

(‘unless you believe, you will not understand’),¹⁰⁸ Polanyi argues that he ‘brought the history of Greek philosophy to a close by inaugurating for the first time a post-critical philosophy. He taught that all knowledge was a gift of grace, for which we must strive under the guidance of antecedent belief. . . .’¹⁰⁹

On the basis of such a renewal, Polanyi sets out to establish the inter-relationship between the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ poles of knowing in order to show that *all* such knowing functions within what he calls a ‘fiduciary framework’. ‘We must now recognise belief once more as the source of all knowledge’, he argues:

Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework.¹¹⁰

He continues:

Innocently, we had trusted that we could be relieved of all personal responsibility for our beliefs by objective criteria of validity – and our own critical powers have shattered this hope. Struck by our sudden nakedness, we may try to brazen it out by flaunting it in a profession of nihilism. . . . The alternative to this, which I am seeking to establish here, is to restore to us once more the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs. We should be able to profess now knowingly and openly those beliefs which could be tacitly taken for granted in the days before modern philosophic criticism reached its present incisiveness. Such powers may appear dangerous. But a dogmatic orthodoxy can be kept in check both internally and externally, while a creed inverted into a science is both blind and deceptive.¹¹¹

That such an epistemological renewal of a dying culture is at the heart of Polanyi’s intentions is explained a few pages earlier when he writes: ‘When I

¹⁰⁸ From Augustine’s *De libero arbitrio*. 1.4 (also 2.6).

¹⁰⁹ Polanyi 1958: 266.

¹¹⁰ Polanyi 1958: 266.

¹¹¹ Polanyi 1958: 268.

gave this book the sub-title “Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy” I had this turning point in mind.”¹¹²

This section of Polanyi’s book represents for Newbigin the key section around which so much of his own missiological thinking subsequently hinges. To be sure, he still draws significant epistemological insights from Polanyi as we will see, but these philosophical insights are now clearly focused within a broader Polanyian structure of *cultural* interpretation. This newer understanding has two aspects: first, that Western culture has now reached a terminal crisis point in its perception of the framework of knowledge; and secondly, that in response to this crisis, a new cultural ‘starting point’ for a renewed appreciation of the process of ‘knowing’ is urgently required.

Both of these aspects are illustrated from Newbigin’s seminal 1983 book *The Other Side of 1984*. Here at the outset of the book, he writes of Western culture that:

It is, no doubt, easy in every age to point to its obvious weaknesses. What is in question here, however, is something more precise. It is the dramatic suddenness with which, in the space of one lifetime, our civilization has so completely lost confidence in its own validity.¹¹³

He continues:

The question now is whether our present self-criticism is merely the normal self-questioning of a healthy culture, or whether we are at the point where a culture is approaching death. It seems to me, and I know that I am not alone, that the truth of our present situation is nearer to the second of these alternatives than to the first.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Polanyi 1958: 265.

¹¹³ Newbigin 1983b: 3.

¹¹⁴ Newbigin 1983b: 3.

Later in the book this analysis of cultural demise is specifically developed in relation to Polanyi's thought, as follows:

At the centre of the movement which created our modern culture was a shift in the balance between faith and doubt. After a very long period in which the European perception of how things are was controlled by a dogma based on divine revelation, the principle of doubt reasserted itself in the famous phrase 'Dare to know'. And who can deny that the result has been fruitful beyond the dreams of those who first used this slogan? Why, then, do we now find ourselves at what feels like a dead-end? Why has life become meaningless for so many in our culture? In a vivid parable Michael Polanyi has suggested the answer: . . .¹¹⁵

At this point, Newbigin again quotes at length the Polanyi passage he had cited in the 1977 article referred to above, and adds: 'I intend to follow Polanyi in the next stage of his argument when he calls for a "post-critical philosophy" as the necessary starting point for the renewal of our culture.'¹¹⁶ Polanyi's thought dominates the ensuing discussion.¹¹⁷ Similarly, one can trace the same influence of Polanyi's cultural diagnosis at the corresponding points in Newbigin's writing.¹¹⁸

Returning to Polanyi's own development of his thesis in the ensuing pages of 'Part Three' of *Personal Knowledge*, we now suggest that the similarity between Newbigin's analysis and that of Polanyi intensifies. In order to establish this, we will follow Polanyi's argument further and then compare it with Newbigin's treatment.

To begin with, Polanyi's appraisal of the dilemma in Enlightenment epistemology is traced back to the intended objectivism of René Descartes. The

¹¹⁵ Newbigin 1983b: 20.

¹¹⁶ Newbigin 1983b: 21.

¹¹⁷ Newbigin 1983b: e.g., 23, 25-6, 28-30.

¹¹⁸ E.g., Newbigin 1986b: 102-3; 1988e: 105-6; 1989g: 5-6; 1991f: 19-20; 1993b: 347; 1995c: 28ff.; 1995d: 47-52.

French philosopher-scientist had attempted to rid all judgements of their inherited assumptions, and – by the use of ‘universal doubt’ – had tried to ‘purge his mind of all opinions held merely on trust and open it to knowledge firmly grounded in reason’.¹¹⁹ By this means Descartes (along with Kant, who had argued that there was no room for opinion in the matter of making right judgements¹²⁰) hoped to leave ‘unassailed a residue of knowledge that is completely determined by the objective evidence.’¹²¹

But this enterprise was bound to fail, argues Polanyi, because the nature of doubt itself – upon which the whole Cartesian quest for objectivity seems to rest – was *itself* bound up with antecedent faith-commitments on the part of the doubter. To establish this, Polanyi identifies two reasons why any statement (‘A’) might be doubted. The first is because another statement (‘B’) is believed to be true in preference to ‘A’; the second because there are deemed to be insufficient grounds for accepting the truth of ‘A’. The first reason is described by Polanyi as ‘contradictory’ doubt; the second as ‘agnostic’ doubt.¹²²

Leaving aside the further development of ‘agnostic’ doubt which Polanyi outlines, his point is that neither of these positions is devoid of ‘fiduciary’ commitments on the part of the doubter. If a statement is doubted on the basis of another statement which is held to be true, then the doubting arises from a prior ‘faith’ commitment (i.e., to the supposed truth-status of the statement from which the doubt arises). Similarly, argues Polanyi, ‘agnostic’ doubt functions on the basis of a similar antecedent belief – either that statement ‘B’ might be proven at

¹¹⁹ Polanyi 1958: 269.

¹²⁰ Polanyi 1958: 269, referring to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, B851.

¹²¹ Polanyi 1958: 269.

¹²² Polanyi 1958: 272-3.

some future date, or else that it could never be proven. As such, this too ‘implies the acceptance of certain beliefs concerning the possibilities of proof.’¹²³ Kant’s programmatic statement that only undoubtable statements are certain must therefore, argues Polanyi, be mistaken.¹²⁴ On the contrary, *all* statements of so-called ‘fact’ contain ‘fiduciary’ elements: elements which may not be strictly ‘provable’, but which nonetheless cannot be denied.

In Newbigin’s analysis of the epistemological crisis we find that René Descartes is also central. He argues that it was the French thinker’s ‘false idea that there is or there should be available to us a certitude which does not depend upon faith’ which was – in Newbigin words – ‘the crucial false step, I am more and more sure.’¹²⁵ It is significant therefore that references to Descartes begin to appear in Newbigin’s writings at the same time as the emergence of what we might call the ‘new perspective’ on Polanyi: a fact which more than suggests that Newbigin’s ‘Cartesian’ perspective is derived from Polanyi.¹²⁶ To be sure, Newbigin writes that it is Descartes ‘who usually gets the blame for these things’,¹²⁷ but it is significant that when the French philosopher appears in Newbigin’s discussions it is usually in connection either with a specific reference to Polanyi’s portrayal of him,¹²⁸ or else with reference to the Polanyian reconstruction of epistemology needed *because of* Descartes.¹²⁹

¹²³ Polanyi 1958: 273.

¹²⁴ Polanyi 1958: 273, referring to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, B766.

¹²⁵ Newbigin 1990s: 5.

¹²⁶ The first reference to Descartes in Newbigin’s work is in the article referred to earlier (1977f: 83), in which Polanyi’s cultural analysis first becomes significant.

¹²⁷ Newbigin 1988f: 192.

¹²⁸ E.g., Newbigin 1986a: 63; 1989f: 33; 1990s: 5: the ‘*faux pas* of Descartes has led into a false ideal of objectivity’ which ‘is the issue which the scientist Michael Polanyi is wrestling with in all his writings’: 1991f: 29; 1993b: 345; 1995d: 47-48, 62, 75.

¹²⁹ E.g., Newbigin 1990s: 6-7; 1991f: 35; 1993b: 345-348.

Moreover, the Polanyian analysis of the flaw in Descartes' critical programme is also directly reflected in Newbigin's later analyses. At these points, Newbigin acknowledges his debt to the insight of Allan Bloom that it was Nietzsche who first saw the fallacy of the Cartesian method.¹³⁰ But it is significant that the way in which Newbigin proceeds to articulate the grounds of this fallacy – that the Cartesian programme is 'inherently self-destructive' because of the 'faith' position needed to doubt any proposition of truth – is pure Polanyi.¹³¹

From this analysis of Polanyi's diagnosis of the critical moment faced by the West, and its influence upon Newbigin's thought, we turn now to the wider themes of *Personal Knowledge*, and trace their influence upon Newbigin's missiological reconstruction. These themes comprise Polanyi's foundational notion of 'personal knowledge', and its related conceptions of 'tacit' knowing, and 'heuristic passion'.

2.3.2 'Personal Knowledge'

In 'Part One' of *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi's basic concern is with the epistemological implications of assigning watertight categories to different 'types' of knowledge. He writes, for example, that:

... modern man has set up as the ideal of knowledge the conception of natural science as a set of statements which is 'objective' in the sense that its substance is entirely determined by observation, even while its presentation may be shaped by convention.¹³²

¹³⁰ E.g., Newbigin 1987d: 129, referring to Bloom 1987.

¹³¹ C.f. e.g., 1995d: 23: 'If you make the assertion "I believe P," I may say "I doubt P because I believe Q, R, and T," which are incompatible with P. In other words, my doubt rests upon a faith commitment'; also 1994d: 63; 1996c: 7-9. Interestingly, Newbigin makes no acknowledgement of Polanyi's influence at these points.

¹³² Polanyi 1958: 16.

In this context, the so-called ‘scientific method’ regulated by its own methodology sought to establish which propositions could be described as ‘objective’, and which should be relegated to the realm of the ‘subjective’. He continues: ‘This conception, stemming from a craving rooted in the very depths of our culture, would be shattered if the intuition of rationality in nature had to be acknowledged as a justifiable and indeed essential part of scientific theory.’¹³³

Polanyi’s specific purpose in writing *Personal Knowledge*, therefore, is ‘to show’, as he puts it, ‘that complete objectivity as usually attributed to the exact sciences is a delusion and is in fact a false ideal.’¹³⁴ By contrast, ‘in rattling all the skeletons in the cupboard of the current scientific outlook’,¹³⁵ he sets out to establish that even within the scientific community what is usually understood as ‘objective’ knowledge – established through experiment and the accumulation of evidence – is in fact deeply ‘personal’. Indeed this ‘personal’ involvement can be described as the scientist’s ‘originality’. As he writes later in the book:

Originality entails a distinctively personal initiative and is invariably impassioned, sometimes to the point of obsessiveness. From the first intimation of a hidden problem and throughout its pursuit to the point of its solution, the process of discovery is guided by a personal vision and sustained by a personal conviction.¹³⁶

This ‘subjective’ and ‘personal’ involvement, argues Polanyi, is intrinsic to the pursuit of scientific progress. For without it, no experiments would be

¹³³ Polanyi 1958: 16.

¹³⁴ Polanyi 1958: 18.

¹³⁵ Polanyi 1958: 18.

¹³⁶ Polanyi 1958: 301. Cf. the later description in Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 60: ‘It seems plausible to assume . . . that two functions of the mind are jointly at work from the beginning to the end of an inquiry. One is the deliberately active powers of the imagination; the other is a spontaneous process of integration which we may call *intuition*. It is the intuition that senses the presence of hidden resources for solving a problem and that launches the imagination in its pursuit. It is also intuition that forms our surmises in the course of this

(Note continued on next page.)

undertaken, and no advances in knowledge would be achievable. As a result, he concludes that all seemingly objective statements require:

. . . to be accompanied by the utterance of a personal commitment in order that they may become the content of an assertion. But the act by which I set my seal to any statement – be it an unambiguous statement or a statement of probability – is a personal act of my own.¹³⁷

Yet, in acknowledging the ‘*personal participation* of the knower in all acts of understanding’, Polanyi argues that this does not ‘make our understanding *subjective*.’¹³⁸ On the contrary, he writes that:

Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience but a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed *objective* in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality, contact that is defined as the condition for anticipating an indefinite range of as yet unknown (and perhaps yet inconceivable) true implications. It seems reasonable to describe this fusion of the personal and the objective as ‘Personal Knowledge’.¹³⁹

As we have seen, Newbigin’s own use of Polanyi’s notion of ‘personal knowledge’ is much earlier than the period of his specific engagement with the problems facing Western culture. In *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, for example, it occurs in a more general epistemological context in which – in response to John Robinson’s book *Honest to God*,¹⁴⁰ and the challenge of what appeared to be a de-personalising conception of God – Newbigin felt the need both to develop a defence of God’s nature as truly personal, and of our knowledge of him as one of personal response.¹⁴¹

pursuit and eventually selects from the material mobilized by the imagination the relevant pieces of evidence and integrates them into the solution of the problem’ (emphasis original).

¹³⁷ Polanyi 1958: 29.

¹³⁸ Polanyi 1958: vii (emphases original).

¹³⁹ Polanyi 1958: vii-viii (emphasis original).

¹⁴⁰ Robinson 1963.

¹⁴¹ See the discussion of Robinson’s book in Newbigin 1966: 88-93.

In his later work, however, a change in his appropriation of Polanyi's insights about 'personal knowledge' is evident. He writes for example in his article, 'How I arrived at *The Other Side of 1984*', that in his quest for answers to the question: 'What would be involved in a really missionary encounter of the gospel with this European culture of which I am a part?', he had found 'great help in Michael Polanyi's *Post-Critical Philosophy*' – specifically at the level at which Polanyi 'exposed the fallacies underlying that dichotomy which is so pervasive in our "modern" culture between "scientific knowledge" which is supposed to be "objective" and faith or belief, which is supposed to be "subjective"'.¹⁴²

As a result of this, Newbigin's material about 'personal knowledge' in his later works (*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, for example) becomes more 'aggressive' in its apologetic – in line more strictly with the original tone of Polanyi's book. To be sure, Newbigin still uses the older perspective to urge upon his readers the appropriateness of the language of 'personal knowledge' to describe the epistemological possibilities opened up by divine revelation.¹⁴³ But alongside this, he now deploys the argument about the 'personal' component of the scientific enterprise in order to highlight the more 'subjective' element in all that the Enlightenment project (by means of its 'scientific method') took to be purely 'objective'. He writes for example that:

I have emphasized the character of scientific knowledge as – in Polanyi's phrase – 'personal knowledge.' It is knowledge to which the scientist commits herself personally and on which she stakes her professional reputation. She accepts the risk that she might be wrong.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Newbigin 1985c: 8.

¹⁴³ E.g., Newbigin 1989f: 61f..

¹⁴⁴ Newbigin 1989f: 48.

Then he continues:

If this is so, must we not say that it is part of the deep sickness of our culture that, ever since Descartes, we have been seduced by the idea of a kind of knowledge which could not be doubted, in which we would be absolutely secure from personal risk?¹⁴⁵

Similarly, in a paper given to the Tyndale House Ethics Group in 1993, he states that part of the ‘consequence of the Cartesian method’ is that our culture has become accustomed to ‘the idea that “science” represents a different kind of knowing from the rest of our knowing of the world.’

Science has been popularly understood to deliver a kind of indisputable and ‘objective’ array of ‘facts’ in contrast to the ‘beliefs and values’ which depend upon subjective factors. It is from within science itself that this misunderstanding is being corrected. Einstein has often been quoted as saying that ‘what you call “facts” depends on the theory that you bring to them’. So far as I know, the most comprehensive rebuttal of this view of science has come from the Hungarian scientist Michael Polanyi.¹⁴⁶

The thrust of this newer apologetic is summed up by Newbigin in a later ‘Preface’ he wrote for the republication of Drusilla Scott’s book on Polanyi. Here he writes that, ‘Polanyi unmasks the illusion that science is a separate kind of knowledge, sharply distinguished from the vast areas of our everyday knowing which we do not call “scientific”.’ ‘His message’, he continues, is that, ‘we do not need to be intimidated by the claims of some populariser of “science” to represent a superior kind of knowledge by which all the rest of our knowing is to be tested and judged.’¹⁴⁷ Once more, therefore, the apologetic dimension to the conception of ‘personal knowledge’ is drawn out and given a harder and more

¹⁴⁵ Newbigin 1989f: 48-49.

¹⁴⁶ Newbigin 1993b: 345.

¹⁴⁷ Newbigin 1996a: v.

aggressive edge.

We now return to the analysis of Polanyi's book in order to show how from the foundational premise about the 'personal' component of knowing, Polanyi develops a coherent 'post-critical' picture both of the nature of truth and of the status of knowledge. He does this by means of an elaboration of a number of themes which undergird and develop the 'personal' conception of knowing. We will explore these in turn in order to demonstrate how each of them has further influenced Newbigin's thinking as he develops his missionary engagement with Western culture. By doing so we will develop the argument that Newbigin's indebtedness to Polanyi lies not only in the 'deconstructive' and 'critical' dimensions of Polanyi's thought, but also in its more positive and reconstructive aspects as well.

2.3.3 'Tacit' knowledge.

The first of the themes developed by Polanyi to expand the concept of 'personal knowledge' is found in 'Part Two' of *Personal Knowledge* and is summed up by its overall title: 'The Tacit Component'.¹⁴⁸ In this section Polanyi argues that the reason why all knowing is 'personal' is that one of its major components is the 'indwelling' of assumptions and skills which are for the moment subconscious to a person's specific actions or thinking, but which are nonetheless real. 'To affirm anything', he writes, 'implies . . . an appraisal of our own art of knowing, and the establishment of truth becomes decisively dependent

¹⁴⁸ Polanyi 1958: 67-245.

on a set of personal criteria of our own which cannot be formally defined.’¹⁴⁹

Polanyi proceeds to develop this line of argument in both its individual and corporate dimensions.

At an individual level, Polanyi uses the example of language to show how the articulation of concepts and ideas is integrally related to a ‘latent knowledge’ within humans which ‘gropes’ towards clarity of expression. As he puts it: ‘Languages are the product of man’s groping for words in the process of making new conceptual decisions, to be conveyed by words.’¹⁵⁰ Polanyi makes the link between this example and the wider thesis about the ‘personal’ nature of knowing by showing how even at the most basic level, there is a ‘personal coefficient’ in the very act of ‘uttering speech’.¹⁵¹ Consequently, speech emerges out of an ‘active shaping of knowledge’ which is part and parcel of the most basic exploratory activity characteristic of human beings – an activity that differentiates humans from the animal kingdom.¹⁵²

In addition to the example of language used here, Polanyi develops his conception of ‘tacit’ knowledge with further examples elsewhere in the book. In defining these elements, he frequently makes the distinction between the concepts of ‘subsidiary’ and ‘focal’ awareness.¹⁵³ For example, he notes that when reading a book in order to gain its overall meaning or sense, the reader exercises only a ‘subsidiary’ awareness of the actual words on the page. His ‘focal’

¹⁴⁹ Polanyi 1958: 71. Polanyi summed up this aspect of knowing in his phrase ‘We know more than we can tell’ (Polanyi 1969: 172 [from a 1962 essay], and 1966: 4).

¹⁵⁰ Polanyi 1958: 112.

¹⁵¹ Polanyi 1958: 132.

¹⁵² Polanyi 1958: 132.

¹⁵³ See the discussion in Polanyi 1958: 55-65. Also, elsewhere in his writings: 1959: 30-32; 1961: 239-340; 1969: 123-129, 140ff.; 1975: 33-37, 44-45. Cf. the useful summary discussion of these aspects of Polanyi’s thought in Manno 1974: 46-52.

attention is on the sense being conveyed rather than on the words themselves. On the other hand, when proof-reading a book, the reader's 'focal' attention is concentrated upon the actual words and syllables rather than upon their wider sensual and contextual meaning.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, when using a hammer to drive a nail into wood, a person maintains a 'subsidiary' awareness of the feeling of the hammer being held in the palm of the hand, but a 'focal' awareness upon the activity of actually hammering the nail. It is at the point of impact that 'focal' awareness is concentrated.¹⁵⁵ This leads Polanyi to the summary statement, that:

When we accept a certain set of pre-suppositions and use them as our interpretative framework, we may be said to dwell in them as we do in our own body. Their uncritical acceptance for the time being consists in a process of assimilation by which we identify ourselves with them. They are not asserted and cannot be asserted, for assertion can be made only *within* a framework with which we have identified ourselves for the time being; as they are themselves our ultimate framework, they are essentially inarticulable.¹⁵⁶

Polanyi's point is that an acceptance of the 'inarticulable' element in the process of knowing – what he elsewhere describes in terms of 'tacit acts',¹⁵⁷ or the 'a-critical act of acceptance',¹⁵⁸ – is intrinsic to a true understanding of epistemology. This is true not least in the case of the scientist. When a new discovery is made, for example, it is not made in an epistemological vacuum, where only an abstract and isolated rationality might operate, unconnected to other forms and influences. Rather, the discovery itself is the result of an

¹⁵⁴ Polanyi 1958: 87-95.

¹⁵⁵ Polanyi 1958: 55-6.

¹⁵⁶ Polanyi 1958: 60 (emphasis original). Cf. 1961: 242: 'I have said that when we rely on our awareness of some things for attending to something else, we assimilate these things to our body. In this sense, then, subsidiary knowledge is held by indwelling. We comprehend the particulars of a whole in terms of the whole by dwelling in the particulars: or, in other words, we grasp the joint meaning of the particulars by dwelling in them.' For a further development of this conception of knowing elsewhere in Polanyi's writings, see 1959: 1-26; 1966: esp. ch. 1; 1975: 33-36.

¹⁵⁷ Polanyi 1958: 264.

¹⁵⁸ Polanyi 1958: 305.

‘indwelling’ of various ‘tacit’, or ‘a-critical’ assumptions and is nearly always preceded by an intuitive ‘hunch’ which seeks formal confirmation in experimentation.¹⁵⁹

Polanyi moves on from here to develop the ‘corporate’ dimension to this conception of ‘indwelling’. For the framework of a-critical assumptions is not only operative within the mindset of the individual but is also in operation within the wider community of which the individual is a part. So, in his conclusion to the section on the ‘Tacit Component’, Polanyi develops a communal perspective to the notion of ‘personal’ participation, and introduces the idea that learning is the submission of the learner to an ‘authoritative tradition’.¹⁶⁰ This ‘grounding’ of the idea of knowledge within the conceptual framework of a community within which such knowledge is held is central to Polanyi’s articulation of how such communities both survive, and expand. The idea of ‘apprenticeship’ is an extension of the concept of ‘indwelling’, and Polanyi again uses the example of language to illustrate its operation:

All arts are learned by intelligently imitating the way they are practised by other persons in whom the learner places his confidence. To know a language is an art, carried on by tacit judgements and the practice of unspecifiable skills. . . . Spoken communication is the successful application by two persons of the linguistic knowledge and skill acquired by such apprenticeship, one person wishing to transmit, the other to receive, information.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ See e.g., Polanyi 1958: 130-131 where he uses the example of the mathematician: ‘The manner in which the mathematician works his way towards discovery, by shifting his confidence from intuition to computation and back again from computation to intuition, while never releasing his hold on either of the two, represents in miniature the whole range of operations by which articulation disciplines and expands the reasoning powers of man . . . The alternation between the intuitive and the formal depends on tacit affirmations, both at the beginning and at the end of each chain of formal reasoning’ (131).

¹⁶⁰ Polanyi 1958: 203ff..

¹⁶¹ Polanyi 1958: 206.

From this foundational example, Polanyi proposes that the same kind of apprenticeship exists within every kind of community and is exhibited in its pursuit of further knowledge. Thus, to make progress within such a community requires a '*previous act of affiliation*, by which the novice accepts apprenticeship to a community which cultivates this lore, appreciates its values and strives to act by its standards.'¹⁶² But such progression depends upon both a recognition of, and an adherence to, 'the framework of interpersonal obligations imposed by the social lore of the group.'¹⁶³ As a result, he can say that the 'combined action of authority and trust which underlies both the learning of language and its use for carrying messages, is a simplified instance of a process which enters into the whole transmission of culture to succeeding generations.'¹⁶⁴

Once again, Polanyi characteristically draws upon the example of the scientific community, not simply because his own expertise lies within this realm, but because it represents the kind of community most committed to the 'objective' understanding of truth that he is attempting to counter.¹⁶⁵ Scientists no less than others are dependent upon the assumptions of the tradition of which they are a part, but at the same time, they seek to transcend that tradition by suggesting new theories and thereby adding to the tradition. 'In this sense', he writes, 'science embraces a consistent pursuit of gradually changing, and – I believe – on the whole, ever more enlightened and elevated intellectual aspirations.'¹⁶⁶ From this foundation, Polanyi develops both an individual and a

¹⁶² Polanyi 1958: 207 (emphasis original).

¹⁶³ Polanyi 1958: 212. See pages 150-160 for examples in which proposals of new theories predated their acceptance within the scientific community, despite the evidence.

¹⁶⁴ Polanyi 1958: 207.

¹⁶⁵ See e.g., Polanyi 1958: 163-164, 216-219, 221.

¹⁶⁶ Polanyi 1958: 165.

corporate dimension to the conception of tacit ‘indwelling’. This helps him to explain how individuals progress in knowledge and how communities maintain and pass on such knowledge. It also enables him to articulate how this process serves to strengthen and enhance the vitality of communities, both in their individual and corporate dimensions. Moreover, these observations are intrinsically connected by Polanyi to his wider quest, which is to demonstrate that this ‘a-critical’ indwelling is at the heart of the epistemological quest, and requires communities – as well as individuals to exercise an appropriate epistemological responsibility.¹⁶⁷

Returning now to Newbigin’s writings, it emerges that he not only draws upon Polanyi’s conception of ‘tacit’ or ‘a-critical’ knowledge and its related notion of ‘indwelling’, but that he adopts and deploys these concepts in highly significant ways in his later missiology. For example, he frequently alludes to Polanyi’s picture of the surgeon ‘using a probe to investigate a cavity into which it is not possible to look’,¹⁶⁸ and at one point draws out the implications of the example in the following manner:

Polanyi takes this as a way of entry into the whole enterprise of knowing, of probing reality. Like the surgeon using the probe, we explore reality by *indwelling* a whole range of instruments - words, concepts, images, ideas. We have to learn to use them, and while we are learning we attend to the new words, the new concepts. But when we have become familiar with their use, we no longer attend to them. We are *tacitly* aware of them, but *focally* aware of the reality they enable us to probe. We *indwell* them.¹⁶⁹

This analytical framework is applied by Newbigin in significant ways

¹⁶⁷ E.g., Polanyi 1958:222f., 378.

¹⁶⁸ Newbigin 1988e: 106-7; 1989g: 7-8; 1989f: 33-34, 46. Newbigin takes the reference in Polanyi’s example to refer to a surgeon, though Polanyi himself is not so specific (cf. Polanyi 1958: 55).

¹⁶⁹ Newbigin 1988e: 106 (emphasis original).

which – whilst conceptually in line with the way in which Polanyi uses them – exceed the scope of their original application. We noted earlier Newbigin's adoption of Polanyi's idea that a 'new starting point' for our culture is urgently needed. In Polanyi's analysis, this 'liberation from objectivism' itself involves an aspect of 'a-critical indwelling'. It is the realisation that 'we can voice our ultimate convictions only from within our convictions – from within the whole system of acceptances that are logically prior to any particular assertion of our own, prior to the holding of any particular piece of knowledge.'¹⁷⁰ Newbigin's adoption of this position is overtly parallel to that of Polanyi. As he puts it in *The Other Side of 1984*: 'If we follow Polanyi in asking for a "post-critical philosophy" as the pre-condition for the renewal of our culture', this will inevitably mean being ready 'to stake our whole future on consciously a-critical statements.'¹⁷¹

But Newbigin's use of Polanyi's notion of 'a-critical', or 'tacit' 'indwelling' is also central to a second aspect of his missiological programme. At this level, Newbigin appropriates the language of 'indwelling' and applies it to the relationship between Christians and biblical revelation. By means of this 'tacit' knowledge believers are enabled to 'attend' focally not only to the business of maturing as Christian disciples, but also to an engagement with the wider world. Just as the experienced reader 'indwells' the knowledge of word-forms and sentence-structures in order to understand what the writer is seeking to communicate, so – in a corresponding manner – believers are called to become so steeped in the Scriptures that the Christian story becomes the framework that is

¹⁷⁰ Polanyi 1958: 267.

¹⁷¹ Newbigin 1983b: 25. Cf. also 1988e: 107-8.

indwelt 'a-critically' so to speak (like the words on the reader's page).¹⁷² As this happens, so Christians become increasingly able to make sense of the world around them *in the light* of revelation. He describes this process in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* in the following manner:

... we get a picture of the Christian life as one in which we live *in* the biblical story as part of the community whose story it is, find in the story the clues to knowing God as his character becomes manifest in the story, and from within that indwelling try to understand and cope with the events of our time and the world about us and so carry the story forward. At the heart of the story, as the key to the whole, is the incarnation of the Word, the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.¹⁷³

He continues, drawing on the imagery in chapter 15 of John's Gospel, and argues that:

... Jesus defines for his disciples what is to be their relation to him. They are to 'dwell in' him. He is not to be the object of their observation, but the body of which they are a part. As they 'indwell' him in his body, they will both be led into fuller and fuller apprehension of the truth and also become the means through which God's will is done in the life of the world.¹⁷⁴

Newbigin hereby takes one of Polanyi's insights into the 'tacit' element of knowing, and proceeds to apply it both ecclesialogically and missiologically. On the one hand, by developing the notion of 'indwelling' in terms of the Church's appropriation of revelation, he develops a dynamic concept of discipleship in which Christians grow in faith, gain a greater understanding of the world, and grasp the wider meaning of reality. On the other hand, by applying the same concept of 'indwelling' to the Church in its *outward* witness, Newbigin is able to articulate a missionary ecclesiology in which the local congregation becomes the

¹⁷² Cf. Newbigin's reference to this example in 1986b: 79-80.

¹⁷³ Newbigin 1989f: 99.

¹⁷⁴ Newbigin 1989f: 99.

means whereby outsiders are enabled to come to faith. Both aspects are ‘hermeneutical’ in perspective: the first in terms of interpreting revelational reality to the Church in its developing discipleship; the second in terms of interpreting the revealed gospel to the outsider – a dynamic in which the congregation becomes ‘the hermeneutic of the gospel’ to unbelievers. We shall look at these in turn.

(i) **‘Indwelling’ the Christian story**

At the level of discipleship, Newbigin combines the Polanyian insight about ‘indwelling’ with an image drawn from George Lindbeck’s, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age*.¹⁷⁵ As we noted in chapter 1, the substance of Lindbeck’s ‘cultural-linguistic’ approach to doctrine is that the Bible functions as ‘the interpretative framework within which believers seek to live their lives and understand reality.’¹⁷⁶ Elsewhere, using the image of reading glasses, he describes the Bible as ‘the lenses through which human beings see and respond to their changing worlds, or the media in which they formulate their descriptions.’¹⁷⁷

In this context, the Bible is to be understood not so much as a set of documents that a reader looks *at* in order to gain meaning or receive instruction, but one that he looks *through* in order to make sense of a wider reality.

¹⁷⁵ Lindbeck 1984.

¹⁷⁶ Lindbeck 1984: 117.

¹⁷⁷ Lindbeck 1984: 83. Wainwright (2000: 449-450) argues that Newbigin derived his image of the ‘lenses’ through which we view culture from Calvin (*Institutes* I.14.1). But though Lindbeck himself makes this connection (Lindbeck 1984: 83), Newbigin does not, deriving it instead (as here) from Lindbeck, or employing it (as below) with reference to the broader Polanyian framework of ‘a-critical indwelling’.

Lindbeck's use of the descriptive term 'cultural-*linguistic*' therefore reflects his belief that the religious discourse of the Bible functions for the Christian in similar terms to the way in which language functions in daily life. In his words, 'It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed.'¹⁷⁸

Newbigin sees the value of Lindbeck's comparison between the religious discourse of the Bible and the use of language. For example, in his essay 'Truth and Authority in Modernity', he writes that:

When Lindbeck uses the term 'cultural-linguistic' to describe his model for doctrine, he is rightly drawing attention to the fact that knowledge requires the ability to use a language and an accepted framework of understanding about 'how things are and how things behave' which enables us to make sense of experience. When we use language to communicate information or to share a vision, we do not attend to the words we are using; we attend *through* the words to the matter in hand.¹⁷⁹

This adoption of Lindbeck's 'intratextual' analysis of the Bible enables Newbigin to articulate an understanding of revelation by means of the framework of 'tacit' knowledge that he had already found in Polanyi's thought.¹⁸⁰ As a result, what emerges in Newbigin's writings is a dynamic conception of the way in which biblical authority should properly function within the life of the Christian community. This understanding works itself out primarily in terms of the framework within which Christians alone find ultimate meaning to their lives. So, for example, in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, he can write about the

¹⁷⁸ Lindbeck 1984: 33.

¹⁷⁹ Newbigin 1994d: 73 (emphasis original).

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Newbigin 1993a: 83; 1996c: 35 where he interprets Lindbeck's 'cultural-linguistic' approach to the Bible within a Polanyian framework of 'tacit knowing'.

character of the biblical narrative as one which provides Christians with a true understanding of who they are:

This is our story, and it defines who we are. Just as character can only be truly rendered in narrative form, so the answer to the question 'Who am I?' can only be given if we ask 'What is my story?' and that can only be answered if there is an answer to the further question, 'What is the whole story of which my story is a part?' To indwell the Bible is to live with an answer to those questions, to know who I am and who is the One to whom I am finally accountable.¹⁸¹

But it also functions as the framework *through* which to comprehend the wider world:

. . . the Christian story provides us with such a set of lenses, not something for us to look *at*, but for us to look *through*. Using Polanyi's terminology, I shall suggest that the Christian community is invited to *indwell* the story, *tacitly* aware of it as shaping the way we understand, but *focally* attending to the world we live in so that we are able confidently, though not infallibly, to increase our understanding of it and our ability to cope with it.¹⁸²

Alongside this deployment, Newbigin also uses the 'corporate' aspect of 'tacit indwelling' in a manner which finds direct parallels with Polanyi's development of the idea of 'apprenticeship within the tradition'. Once more, however, he re-deploys Polanyi's notion in order to apply it to an understanding of the Christian 'tradition' indwelt by the Church. In a similar way to Newbigin's use of the Polanyian notion of 'tacit knowing', this re-interpretation of the concept of 'apprenticeship' also functions at two levels.

Firstly, Newbigin uses the idea to re-affirm the strength of the Christian

¹⁸¹ Newbigin 1989f: 100. Note the way in which this notion of revelation also addresses the failure of post-Enlightenment thought to reach an answer to the question of 'purpose'. For an analysis of this, cf. e.g. 1986b: 27-37; 1990s: 2f.; 1990q: 2; 1991f: 21-22; 1996c: 76.

¹⁸² Newbigin 1989f: 38 (emphases original). Also: 227: 'Insofar as it is true to its calling, it becomes the place where men and women and children find that the gospel gives them the framework of understanding, the "lenses" through which they are able to understand and cope with the world.' In this sense, Newbigin's deployment is less self-descriptive than Lindbeck's, being developed in terms of active and outward-orientated discipleship.

‘tradition’ of knowledge and experience in which the believing community has been nurtured, and upon which it must continue to draw if it is to grow in maturity. Indeed, part of the Church’s incapacity for effective mission is explained by its refusal to espouse and live in the strength of this ‘tradition’. ‘One of the conditions for the Church’s faithful participation in . . . a pluralist society’, he argues, ‘would be that the Church would have the same kind of respect for its tradition as the scientific community has for its scientific tradition.’¹⁸³ He continues:

While recognizing that all traditions are open to correction and development, it must ensure that those who undertake these tasks have first had a thorough *apprenticeship in the tradition*. . . . Science has become the most dynamic element in our culture because the scientific community has continued to believe that truth is knowable and that, insofar as it is known, it has authority. Science thrusts powerfully forward because it has strong traditions.¹⁸⁴

He argues strongly that the Church must follow this example, and lays the blame for the ‘relatively anaemic state of theological studies’ on the fact that Christians have ‘lost their roots and are drifting with the current of contemporary fashion.’¹⁸⁵

At a second level also, Polanyi’s notion of an ‘apprenticeship within the tradition’ is incorporated by Newbigin as an intrinsic element in his understanding of how true disciples are developed. ‘Like the scientist,’ he argues, ‘the Christian believer has to learn to indwell the tradition. . . . He has to trust the tradition and trust the teacher as an authorized interpreter of it. . . .

¹⁸³ Newbigin 1988c: 170.

¹⁸⁴ Newbigin 1988c: 170 (emphasis added). Note once more the immediate connection with the scientific community.

¹⁸⁵ Newbigin 1988c: 170.

There is no alternative to this. . . . It is a personal and practical discipleship within the tradition.’¹⁸⁶

At both levels then, Newbigin builds on Polanyi’s insights about ‘apprenticeship’ within the scientific community and applies them to the Christian Church. Not surprisingly perhaps, he also finds no difficulty in drawing parallels between what Polanyi calls the ‘Republic of Science’ (the community of scientists within which the enterprise of science is carried on)¹⁸⁷ and the body of Christ. In a manner corresponding to the behaviour appropriate to the scientific community, the Church must act as a community of responsible investigators, located in a tradition of shared knowledge, and engaged in exploring the reality of the created world by means of an inherited and ‘indwelt’ tradition. Only as a result of this may Christians be in a position to declare (or in Polanyi’s word, ‘publish’) what they know.¹⁸⁸

Newbigin is aware of course that Polanyi’s analysis of the scientific community differs in one important respect from his own descriptions of the Church. In the former, ‘the tradition is one of human learning, writing, and speaking.’¹⁸⁹ On the other hand: ‘In the case of the Christian community the tradition is that of witness to the action of God in history, action which reveals and effects the purpose of the Creator.’¹⁹⁰ This is a different kind of ‘reality’ from that which characterises the quest of the scientific community. He

¹⁸⁶ Newbigin 1989f: 49-50.

¹⁸⁷ The phrase is used by Polanyi in the title of a 1962 essay (in Polanyi 1969: 49-72).

¹⁸⁸ See e.g., Newbigin 1989f: 43-51, or 1995d: e.g., 39-44 for Newbigin’s comparison of the Church with Polanyi’s description of the scientific community. He refers specifically to Polanyi’s phrase ‘The Republic of Science’ in 1988c: 168; 1989d: 1; 1991f: 57-8; 1991c: 4. For Polanyi’s idea of ‘publishing’, see below, section 2.3.4 (ii).

¹⁸⁹ Newbigin 1989f: 50.

¹⁹⁰ Newbigin 1989f: 50.

continues:

Thus the Christian understanding of the world is not only a matter of ‘dwelling in’ a tradition of understanding; it is a matter of dwelling in a story of God’s activity, activity which is still continuing. The knowledge which Christian faith seeks is knowledge of God who has acted and is acting.¹⁹¹

Nonetheless, despite the difference in emphasis within the traditions of the two communities, it is still Polanyi’s conceptual framework that has influenced not only the basic structure, but also the development, of Newbigin’s understanding of the Church in its integration of the various aspects of knowledge intrinsic to discipleship.

(ii) *The ‘hermeneutic of the gospel’*

The integration of these dimensions of ‘knowing’ within the Church leads Newbigin in turn to a description of the missionary aspect of ecclesial ‘indwelling’. This is that by means of such an ‘indwelling’, the gospel might not only be ‘interpreted’ with increasing clarity to those who are already Christians (and so strengthen the ongoing life of the Christian tradition itself), but might also be made known to those *outside* the church community as well. This further dimension to the notion of ‘indwelling’ is encapsulated by Newbigin by means of his reference to the local congregation as the ‘hermeneutic of the gospel’.

Newbigin had first used the phrase in his 1980 booklet *Your Kingdom Come* where he had applied it to the ‘Church as a whole’ in its witness to the Kingdom.¹⁹² The actual phrase is not used again until the late 1980s when it re-

¹⁹¹ Newbigin 1989f: 51.

¹⁹² Newbigin 1980c: 38: ‘It is the Church as a whole which has to be the hermeneutic of the Gospel’.

emerges as a key expression in Newbigin's articulation of the missiological significance of the local church congregation. This 're-emergence' is first seen in his 1987 article, 'Evangelism in the City' where he addresses the profound missionary need of the hour by posing the following question:

How can this strange story of God made flesh, of a crucified Savior, of resurrection and new creation become credible for those whose entire mental training has conditioned them to believe that the real world is the world which can be satisfactorily explained and managed without the hypothesis of God?¹⁹³

His response is that: 'I know of only one clue to the answering of that question, only one real hermeneutic of the gospel: a congregation which believes it.'¹⁹⁴ And he concludes by insisting that: 'There is no other hermeneutic of the gospel.'¹⁹⁵

Two years later in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* Newbigin devotes a whole chapter to the concept.¹⁹⁶ Here, he argues that a critical problem for the development of a missionary engagement with the West is that the Church itself has submitted itself to the dominant cultural assumptions of the Enlightenment. This 'domestication of the gospel'¹⁹⁷ to the 'reigning plausibility structure' of the West must be rejected in favour of another, more radical, approach. In this context, Newbigin calls for nothing less than a fundamental re-orientation of cultural assumptions *within* the Church in order that it might demonstrate once more in its life and worship an *alternative* 'plausibility structure' to the one that presently dominates Western culture.

¹⁹³ Newbigin 1987b: 4.

¹⁹⁴ Newbigin 1987b: 4.

¹⁹⁵ Newbigin 1987b: 5. For other references to the congregation as the 'hermeneutic of the gospel' outside the two works specifically referred to in the text. see 1988c: 175; 1990d: 153; and 1990c: 339.

¹⁹⁶ Chapter 8:222-233.

¹⁹⁷ A phrase used in Newbigin 1989f: 10-11.

He addresses this challenge at a number of points in the book, of which the following is characteristic:

... it is only as we are truly 'indwelling' the gospel story, only as we are so deeply involved in the life of the community which is shaped by this story that it becomes our real 'plausibility structure,' that we are able steadily and confidently to live in this attitude of eager hope. Almost everything in the 'plausibility structure' which is the habitation of our society seems to contradict this Christian hope. Everything suggests that it is absurd to believe that the true authority over all things is represented in a crucified man. No amount of brilliant argument can make it sound reasonable to the inhabitants of the reigning plausibility structure. That is why I am suggesting that the only possible hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation which believes it.¹⁹⁸

Indeed, only in this way can secular society be reached, for the 'reigning plausibility structure can only be effectively challenged by people who are fully integrated inhabitants of another.'¹⁹⁹

The understanding of the Church as a 'missionary' community is not in itself a new idea for Newbigin. From his earliest writings, he had articulated an essentially 'missionary' ecclesiology which had found classic expression in such books as *The Household of God* published in 1953,²⁰⁰ and in later studies which emphasised the Trinitarian aspects of mission and their implications for ecclesiology.²⁰¹ Nonetheless, with Newbigin's more specific reflections on the question of what would be involved in a 'missionary engagement' with Western culture, the development of this missionary ecclesiology is now brought much more closely into line with what – in his reading of Polanyi – Newbigin had come to consider as the need of the hour.

¹⁹⁸ Newbigin 1989f: 232.

¹⁹⁹ Newbigin 1989f: 228.

²⁰⁰ Newbigin 1953. Here he develops the missionary nature of the Church in terms of its existence as a 'foretaste' of heaven. (E.g., 147-8: 'Precisely because the Church is here and now a real foretaste of heaven, she can be the witness and instrument of the kingdom of heaven').

²⁰¹ E.g., Newbigin 1958; 1963; 1978b (revised as 1995c).

This – as we have seen – needed to address two issues in particular: firstly, the need for a radical renewal of culture by means of a fresh epistemological ‘starting point’; and secondly, the need for such a renewal to be demonstrated and to take root within contemporary culture, so that its reality might be seen by others.

Newbigin’s response to this dual challenge is that it is through the Church’s ‘indwelling’ of the gospel – as its only possible ‘hermeneutic’ – that both needs are addressed. On the one hand, by ‘indwelling’ the Bible’s story, the Church meets the crisis of the hour by providing the epistemological starting point for cultural renewal. At the same time, by providing such a starting point *within* contemporary culture it incarnates the true life that derives from such foundations.

By this means, therefore, the Polanyian notion of ‘indwelling’, which had previously been employed to develop a dynamic concept of discipleship, is now also deployed as the foundation for Newbigin’s *missionary* doctrine of the Church. By doing so, Newbigin brilliantly incorporates into a missionary context both the epistemological aspect of cultural ‘crisis’ and that of cultural ‘opportunity’ that he had derived from his Hungarian mentor.

2.3.4 ‘Heuristic passion’

If the previous section demonstrates Newbigin’s indebtedness to Polanyi’s concept of ‘indwelling’ for his development of a missionary ecclesiology, this final section deals with Polanyi’s material on the more ‘overt’ forms of public proclamation and assesses their influence on Newbigin’s thought.

One of the fundamental premises undergirding Polanyi's notion of knowledge is – as he states in the Preface to *Personal Knowledge* – that it is 'objective' in the sense of 'establishing contact with a hidden reality' and therefore claims 'universal validity'.²⁰² Once again, this notion is developed as an intrinsic aspect of the 'personal' nature of all knowing, for it involves an 'originality'²⁰³ on the part of the 'discoverer' which may not appear to be integrated with other knowledge at the point of discovery. It therefore represents a personal 'intuition' involving 'risk'. 'Personal knowledge' he writes 'is an intellectual commitment, and as such is inherently hazardous.'²⁰⁴ Polanyi refers to Copernicus' anticipation of the later discoveries of Kepler and Newton as an example of what he refers to as the 'oddity of our thoughts in being much deeper than we know and in disclosing their major import unexpectedly to later minds.'²⁰⁵ But by the same token, he argues, it can be said that when a scientific theory is accepted, its original 'rationality' can be seen to be 'accredited with prophetic powers.' 'We accept it in the hope of making contact with reality; so that, being really true, our theory may yet show forth its truth through future centuries in ways undreamed of by its authors.'²⁰⁶ For Polanyi, therefore, the 'triumph' of the discoverer lies precisely in what he calls the 'yet hidden implications' which 'his discovery will reveal in later days to other eyes.'²⁰⁷ The phrase 'heuristic passion'²⁰⁸ refers then to the way in which Polanyi describes and develops this aspect of the fiduciary programme. He writes that:

²⁰² Polanyi 1958: vii.

²⁰³ See e.g., the use of this word in Polanyi 1958: 301, 311.

²⁰⁴ Polanyi 1958: viii.

²⁰⁵ Polanyi 1958: 104.

²⁰⁶ Polanyi 1958: 5.

²⁰⁷ Polanyi 1958: 64.

²⁰⁸ See the section heading for Polanyi 1958: 142-145.

Intellectual passions do not merely affirm the existence of harmonies which foreshadow an indeterminate range of future discoveries, but can also evoke intimations of specific discoveries and sustain their persistent pursuit through years of labour. . . . Such is the *heuristic* function of scientific passion.²⁰⁹

Polanyi develops this notion at various points throughout the book, integrating it once more within both individual and corporate settings.²¹⁰ In the individual context, for example, it is this ‘passion’ (later described as a ‘heuristic impulse’²¹¹) that drives and motivates the scientist towards further discovery. But the assimilation of such discoveries is simultaneously ‘regulated’ within the corporate community setting. As he puts it: ‘The science of today serves as a heuristic guide for its own further development.’²¹² This has its outworking not only in terms of providing the context and parameters within which further lines of research and enquiry are fuelled, but also by supplying the framework of acceptance within which knowledge is regulated and transmitted to future generations.

Nonetheless, this ‘heuristic passion’ carries within its self-understanding an inevitably ‘public’ side. Discoveries demand by their very nature to be ‘published’ because they bear upon ‘an aspect of reality, a reality largely hidden to us . . .’²¹³ As a result he asserts in a significant statement, that: ‘By trying to say something that is true about a reality believed to be existing independently of our knowing it, all assertions of fact necessarily carry *universal intent*.’²¹⁴ Consequently, Polanyi’s plea is that although a scientist’s ‘intimations of a

²⁰⁹ Polanyi 1958: 143 (emphasis original).

²¹⁰ See esp. vii-viii, 64, 104, 130, 311.

²¹¹ Polanyi 1958: 366. Cf. 1961: 246: ‘I have described it as a passionate pursuit of a hidden meaning, guided by intensely personal intimations of this yet unexposed reality.’

²¹² Polanyi 1958: 311.

²¹³ Polanyi 1958: 311.

²¹⁴ Polanyi 1958: 311 (emphasis original).

hidden reality are personal’ and constitute beliefs ‘which – owing to his originality – as yet he alone holds’:

Yet they are not a subjective state of mind, but convictions held with universal intent, and heavy with arduous projects. It was he who decided what to believe, yet there is no arbitrariness in his decision. For he arrived at his conclusions by the utmost exercise of responsibility. He has reached responsible beliefs, born of necessity, and not changeable at will. In a heuristic commitment, affirmation, surrender and legislation are fused into a single thought, bearing on a hidden reality.²¹⁵

It follows from this that the scientist will of necessity want to place his findings in the public arena not only because he believes that he has made contact with ‘reality’, but also because to do so will be to test whether the results of his findings can be borne out in practice, leading himself and others to fresh discoveries and to further truth. Polanyi therefore states that ‘in spite of the hazards involved, I am called upon to search for the truth and state my findings.’²¹⁶ Indeed, the knower ‘can do no more, and he would evade his calling by doing less. The possibility of error is a necessary element of any belief bearing on reality, and to withhold belief on the grounds of such a hazard is to break off all contact with reality.’²¹⁷ He concludes therefore that:

The outcome of a competent fiduciary act may, admittedly, vary from one person to another, but since the differences are not due to any arbitrariness on the part of the individuals, each retains justifiably his universal intent. As each hopes to capture an aspect of reality, they may all hope that their findings will eventually coincide or supplement each other.²¹⁸

Returning now to Newbigin’s writings, we will see that both aspects of this ‘heuristic passion’ (its ‘hazardous’ commitment in the present which seeks

²¹⁵ Polanyi 1958: 311.

²¹⁶ Polanyi 1958: 315 (the phrase is repeated exactly on p.299).

²¹⁷ Polanyi 1958: 315.

²¹⁸ Polanyi 1958: 315.

future confirmation through experience, as well as its related obligation to ‘publish’) have strongly influenced his later missiological thinking. This may be seen firstly in the way that Newbigin articulates a conception of ‘truth’; secondly, in the way that he uses the idea of ‘publishing with universal intent’; and finally in the way that his concept of the gospel as ‘public truth’ brings both of these concepts together into a single vision. We shall consider each of these in turn.

(i) *The conception of truth*

In the first place, we have seen that central to Newbigin’s challenge to the Church in the West is that it has become subject to the dominant cultural assumptions of modernity. In particular Christians have adopted the modernist notion that faith is ‘subjective’ and therefore finds no connection with the concrete reality of ‘facts’. As we have seen, Newbigin’s late missiology is characterised by the attempt to counter this view, and to restore confidence to the Church in the validity of its foundations of belief. We will now argue that in attempting to articulate a notion of truth that is both ‘personal’ (and therefore must admit to an essential element of subjectivity) and yet at the same time properly ‘objective’, he has adopted Polanyi’s notion that a claim to truth demonstrates its ‘objectivity’ by the fact that it *leads the enquirer to further truth*.

In his 1991 book *Truth to Tell* for example, Newbigin defends the idea that Christian faith ‘is a matter of personal commitment’. But this is now couched in recognisably Polanyian terms: it is a commitment ‘to the understanding of a reality which is not in my mind but “out there.”’ And the proof

of this is in my willingness to publish it and to test it in all relevant situations.’²¹⁹ He dismisses the false objectivism of post-Enlightenment West with its ‘illusion that we can evade personal responsibility for our assertions of truth’²²⁰ by directly quoting the passage from Polanyi’s ‘Preface’ to *Personal Knowledge* quoted earlier.²²¹ He proceeds by defending Polanyi’s position and arguing that:

There is no knowing without the willingness to search, to explore, to take risks. ‘Only affirmations which could be false,’ [Polanyi] says, ‘can be said to convey objective knowledge of this kind’ - that is to say, knowledge which proves to be objective by the fact that it leads on to further knowledge. The ideal of a kind of objectivity which eliminates personal responsibility is false and deceptive.’²²²

But the point to notice here is the way in which the concept of ‘truth’ for Newbigin is now articulated within a Polanyian framework of ‘heuristic’ discovery. It will demonstrate its truthfulness by the way in which it leads to further truth. Newbigin makes this same point in his 1995 book *Proper Confidence* where he explicitly defends Polanyi’s view as follows:

Polanyi says that the truth of the claim either will or will not be validated depending on whether or not it leads to further truth. A valid truth claim will lead to new discovery - often to discoveries undreamt of by the scientist themselves. The truth claims of scientists are thus not irreformable and indubitable claims to possess the truth; rather they are claims to be on the way to the fullness of truth.²²³

²¹⁹ Newbigin 1991f: 33.

²²⁰ Newbigin 1991f: 51.

²²¹ ‘Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowledge is indeed *objective* in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality; a contact that can be defined as the condition for establishing an indeterminate range of yet unknown (and perhaps yet inconceivable) true implications’ (Newbigin 1991f: 51-2, quoting Polanyi 1958: vii-viii). In all, Newbigin quotes Polanyi’s ‘Preface’ at this point four times in his writings and proceeds to build the same case from it (1991c: 5; 1991f: 51-52; 1995d: 43-44; 1996a: v).

²²² Newbigin 1991f: 52 (quoting Polanyi 1958: viii).

²²³ Newbigin 1995d: 43.

In further defending this view of knowledge from the charge of subjectivism, Newbigin develops the case (once more in parallel to Polanyi's own defence) for a knowledge that requires us 'to make costly and risky commitments'.²²⁴ These 'risky commitments' are part of the personal investment in the art of knowing, and yet they confirm their contact with reality by means of the further truths that they lead to.

That this understanding of truth is central to Newbigin's later missiology may be seen in a quotation from Newbigin's 'Conference Call' for the 'Gospel and Culture' conference in July 1992. Here, without specific reference to Polanyi, we find both the Polanyian call for a 'new starting point' alongside a Polanyian conception of truth. Newbigin argues that:

To affirm the Gospel as public truth is to invite acceptance of a new starting point for thought, the truth of which will be proved only in the course of a life of reflection and action which proves itself more adequate to the totality of human experience than its rivals.²²⁵

(ii) *Publication 'with universal intent'*

As another aspect of his indebtedness to Polanyi's notion of 'heuristic passion' Newbigin also employs Polanyi's idea that a personal commitment to the discovery of aspects of a 'hidden reality' is by its nature a commitment that is carried out 'with universal intent'.

²²⁴ Newbigin 1995d: 46; also, 1996c: 36.

²²⁵ Newbigin 1992b: 2 (also 1992e: 1. This latter article is essentially a reprint of the original 'Call'.) Cf. also Newbigin 1989f: 77: where he argues that the Church's obligation is 'to seek to show in the practice of life today that (the gospel) is the rational tradition which is capable of giving greater coherence and intelligibility to all experience than any other tradition.'

Newbigin uses the phrase ‘universal intent’ eleven times in all (eight of which are in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*),²²⁶ and does so in a way that – like his mentor – closely connects it to the future testing and establishing of truth. The following quotation from Newbigin’s 1988 article ‘Our Missionary Responsibility in the Crisis of Western Culture’ illustrates these interrelated aspects:

... this personal commitment is, as Polanyi says, ‘with universal intent’. It is firmly anchored to the objective pole. It is made in the belief that this is the way to grasp reality more truly, not just that it is what I personally prefer. It is made in the faith that what is shown as truth is truth for all. And if it is indeed what I believe, it will prove itself so by opening the way to fresh discoveries and fresh coherences and fresh clarities.²²⁷

Here – like Polanyi – Newbigin uses the concept of ‘universal intent’ to establish the ‘objective’ core of that which is believed. Firstly, it is held ‘as being a true account of reality’,²²⁸ and therefore – as in the above quotation – is ‘firmly anchored to the objective pole’. Secondly, because of this ‘objectivity’, the use of the phrase ‘with universal intent’ underscores the fact that such commitment is a commitment to a truth which is ‘true for all’, and is therefore qualitatively distinguishable from the category of ‘subjective personal preference’. It is – he argues – ‘a true account of reality which all people ought to accept’;²²⁹ it is ‘truth which is true for all’.²³⁰ Moreover, it is precisely because faith claims have ‘universal intent’ that they must be published. ‘We must seek to show others that they are valid’ he argues;²³¹ and ‘we express that intent by publishing them and

²²⁶ Newbigin 1988g: 151; 1988e: 108; 1989f: 35, 47, 48, 50, 77, 92, 126, 192; 1995d: 43.

²²⁷ Newbigin 1988e: 108.

²²⁸ Newbigin 1989f: 48.

²²⁹ Newbigin 1989f: 48.

²³⁰ Newbigin 1989f: 50.

²³¹ Newbigin 1989f: 192.

inviting all people to consider and accept them'.²³² By the same means (and here we note the connection with the previous section) such publication will provide the grounds upon which these claims are tested for their ability to lead the enquirer to what Newbigin describes variously as 'confirmation by further experience',²³³ or 'experimental verification',²³⁴ or to what he summarises elsewhere as 'fresh discoveries and fresh coherences and fresh clarities'.²³⁵

This framework may be seen to be quintessentially 'Polanyian' in its linking of the concepts of 'personal commitment', 'objectivity', 'testing' and 'publication'. In terms of Newbigin's particular application of the framework of 'universal intent' to the Church's missionary engagement with the West, three perspectives emerge. Firstly, the idea occasionally takes on an overtly 'evangelistic' dimension. Secondly, it enables Newbigin to develop two dimensions to his conception of 'dialogue'. Thirdly, it undergirds his late emphasis on the gospel as 'public truth'. We will discuss each of these aspects in turn.

(a) Evangelism

The most straightforward application of Polanyi's notion of 'publication' for Newbigin is to the realm of 'evangelism'. This application is to be distinguished from that of Polanyi's of course, where 'publication with universal intent' is epitomised by the production of scientific theories. Yet in Newbigin's thought, the 'publication' of the gospel is naturally seen as its equivalent. In this context

²³² Newbigin 1989f: 192.

²³³ Newbigin 1989f: 35.

²³⁴ Newbigin 1989f: 48.

²³⁵ E.g., Newbigin 1988e: 108.

therefore, he appropriates Polanyi's understanding of the 'fiduciary' commitments involved in scientific 'publishing' and appropriates them to refer specifically to the gospel – held in 'faith' – which believers are called upon to declare.²³⁶ As he puts it:

If I am committed to seeking to understand what happened from within this Christian tradition, that is a decision for which I am responsible. But this decision and commitment is delivered from mere subjectivity by being made - as Polanyi would say - with universal intent. In other words, I cannot treat it as simply a personal decision; I am bound to publish it, to commend it to others, and to seek to show in the practice of life today that it is the rational tradition which is capable of giving greater coherence and intelligibility to all experience than any other tradition.²³⁷

At another point, he refers to 'the faith' as that which is held 'with universal intent', and proceeds with the following statement:

... as the command of Jesus tells us, it is to be made known to all the nations, to all human communities of whatever race or creed or culture. It is public truth. We commend it to all people in the hope that, by the witness of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of others, it will come to be seen by them for themselves as the truth.²³⁸

(b) *'Dialogue'*

Secondly, alongside the more overtly 'proclamatory' dimension to the idea of 'publication', the notion of 'universal intent' (with the connected sense of 'testing') also enables Newbigin to sustain a creative understanding of 'dialogue' as a fundamental aspect of missionary engagement in the context of late modernity. This dialogue is intrinsically linked to the idea of universality in the

²³⁶ The ramifications of this 'appropriation' will be explored in more detail in chapter 4.

²³⁷ Newbigin 1989f: 77.

²³⁸ Newbigin 1989f: 50 (also 22). Cf. also 1990n: 141; 1990s: 6; 1991f: 33; 1991c: 9.

sense that it represents part of the ‘public interrogation and debate’²³⁹ that must ensue when the gospel is ‘published’, and by which it must be tested in order that its validity be demonstrated. It is also founded inescapably upon fiduciary presuppositions which are – for the moment – unquestioned. In this context, there are two levels at which the notion of ‘dialogue’ operates in Newbigin’s later work: the first is in the interface between Christianity and other religions, the second in the Church’s dialogue with the culture of which it is itself a part.

‘Inter-religious’ dialogue

With regard to Newbigin’s discussions about the interface between Christianity and other religions, it is possible to argue that his thought takes a fresh direction from around the mid-1970s. This has been pointed out by Hunsberger,²⁴⁰ who argues that his earlier discussions were marked by attempts to derive a ‘reasonable typology’ in the approach to a number of interrelated issues: for example, the examination of various proposals for a universal faith,²⁴¹ alternative approaches to the claim that Christ is unique,²⁴² models for inter-religious dialogue,²⁴³ proposed structures for religious unity,²⁴⁴ or approaches to the concept of ‘religion’.²⁴⁵

Hunsberger argues that a change in Newbigin’s treatment of the theme of inter-religious dialogue emerges with the publication of the 1st edition of *The*

²³⁹ Newbigin 1989f: 50.

²⁴⁰ Hunsberger 1998a: 215ff..

²⁴¹ E.g., Newbigin 1961.

²⁴² Newbigin 1969.

²⁴³ Newbigin 1977a.

²⁴⁴ Newbigin 1977b.

²⁴⁵ Newbigin 1977f.

Open Secret in 1978.²⁴⁶ Here, in a discussion about the implications of a contemporary faith-commitment to the unique authority of Christ, Newbigin states that: ‘It is now necessary to face the difficult questions which arise when this commitment is brought into contact with other unconditional commitments of the same kind.’²⁴⁷ It is the realisation that Christians are increasingly surrounded by *other* ‘ultimate commitments’ which forms the basis upon which this newer understanding of ‘dialogue’ must now take place. As Hunsberger points out, it is a ‘dialogue *of* the religions’²⁴⁸ rather than a dialogue *with* the religions, and it calls for an attitude on the part of Christians which Newbigin describes as one of ‘obedient witness’.²⁴⁹ Hunsberger also notes that the relevant chapter in *The Open Secret* is itself a revision of Newbigin’s earlier article on inter-faith dialogue,²⁵⁰ and that the newer phrase ‘dialogue of the religions’ had been incorporated as part of the revision process.

The conclusions Hunsberger draws from this derive from his view that Newbigin was facing up to the fact that inter-religious dialogue was a more immediate and pressing reality than had been the case hitherto. As Hunsberger puts it: ‘The discussion with adherents to other commitments is going on every day. It is at the gate [and] had only recently become a living fact for residents of the United Kingdom’.²⁵¹

There may be an element of truth in this suggestion, though Newbigin’s awareness of ‘other’ faiths had always been part of his life as a missionary to a

²⁴⁶ It was later republished with minor changes as Newbigin 1995c.

²⁴⁷ Newbigin 1978b: 180, noted in Hunsberger 1998a: 216.

²⁴⁸ Hunsberger 1998a: 216 (quoting Newbigin 1978b: 210 and adding emphasis).

²⁴⁹ Newbigin 1978b: 205-206.

²⁵⁰ Newbigin 1977a.

²⁵¹ Hunsberger 1998a: 216.

degree that would not warrant by itself such a sudden change of emphasis at this point. Rather, what *is* clear is that both the earlier article and the chapter in *The Open Secret* can be shown to share a dependency upon the newer reading of Polanyi that we have been defending. The change in perspective apparent in Newbigin's language derives not so much from an awareness of a changed *cultural* context, as from a fresh approach to the question of 'ultimate commitments' derived from Polanyi.

For example, in *The Open Secret* Newbigin points out that in the new 'pluralist' context the only grounds upon which an answer can be given to the question 'Why mission?' are the grounds that the authority for mission resides 'In the name of Jesus'.²⁵² He continues by arguing that the consequence of this is that:

... we shall be offering a model for understanding human life – a model that cannot be verified by reference to the axioms of our culture but that is offered on the authority of revelation and with the claim that it does provide the possibility of a practical wisdom to grasp and deal with human life as it really is.²⁵³

He adds: 'I have been encouraged to think that this is a fruitful approach to the subject of this book by reading the parallel that Michael Polanyi has drawn between our time and the time for which Augustine wrote'. He then proceeds to quote again in full the passage about the 'critical framework' burning away.²⁵⁴

In other words the foundation for missionary activity defended by Newbigin in this context is specifically now articulated within a Polanyian perspective which takes as its starting point a 'fiduciary' commitment to a reality

²⁵² Newbigin 1978b: 16, 20ff..

²⁵³ Newbigin 1978b: 30.

²⁵⁴ Newbigin 1978b: 30-31 (quoting Polanyi 1958: 265).

which cannot be proved by the axioms of contemporary culture, but which – through open dialogue and debate – will prove itself best able to deal with the complexities of human existence.

Moreover this reading of Polanyi also specifically undergirds the earlier article on which the chapter in *The Open Secret* is based. Here the opening words of that article are worth quoting at length:

All intellectual activity implies some presuppositions. Thoughts can only be formulated in words and these words have been formed by the previous thought of the community whose language they are. Even the most radical scepticism can only be formulated in terms of presuppositions which are - for the moment - unquestioned. (See Michael Polanyi: *Personal Knowledge*, chap. 9, 'The Critique of Doubt', pp.269-98.) In dialogue between representatives of different faiths the participants are called upon to submit their most fundamental presuppositions, the very grammar and syntax of their thought, to critical questioning.²⁵⁵

What signals the transition to a newer perspective in Newbigin's discussions about dialogue is therefore not so much his admission of the changed circumstances in which contemporary Christians find themselves, but rather his recapitulation of the task of apologetics within a Polanyian framework. Here 'universal intent' is based upon the founding of witness on fiduciary 'presuppositions which are – for the moment – unquestioned'. Dialogue (with its implication of 'testing') is the process whereby different 'ultimate commitments' are brought face to face with one another. It is in this context, we suggest, that Newbigin's material about inter-religious dialogue in *The Open Secret* (with its statements like 'The Christian partner in the dialogue will certainly put his

²⁵⁵ Newbigin 1977a: 253.

“Christianity” at risk’²⁵⁶) is best interpreted. Hunsberger notes the transition in Newbigin’s thinking at this point but fails to identify the reason.

‘Cultural’ dialogue

What is also evident in Newbigin’s later missiology, however, is a new dimension to the concept of ‘dialogue’ which also owes its articulation to the Polanyian concept of ‘publication with universal intent’. This emerges first in *The Other Side of 1984* where, in the context of a discussion of Polanyi’s notion of ‘fiduciary frameworks’, he writes with reference to the Church that:

. . . the supremely critical dialogue which it must now face is not the dialogue with other religions (important as that certainly is) but the dialogue with the culture which took its shape at the Enlightenment and with which the European churches have lived in an illegitimate syncretism ever since. Such a dialogue will always mean that our own basic presuppositions are called in question by the other party. Because of what I believe about Jesus Christ I believe that this open encounter can only lead both the Church and the other partners in the dialogue into a fuller apprehension of the truth. This is not ‘dialogue insured against risk’; it is part of the ultimate commitment of faith – a commitment which always means risking everything.²⁵⁷

In developing this point he later writes:

A truly missionary approach . . . would recognize frankly the fact that the Christian dogma offers a ‘fiduciary framework’ quite different from and (in some respects) incompatible with the framework within which modern European culture has developed; and would be quite bold and uncompromising in setting forth the Christian ‘dogma’, but also very humble and teachable in engaging in dialogue with those who live by other fundamental beliefs.²⁵⁸

Here, dialogue is conceived as taking place between the Church and the culture of which the Christian community is a part. Newbigin states that this

²⁵⁶ Newbigin 1978b: 210 (quoted in Hunsberger 1998a: 216).

²⁵⁷ Newbigin 1983b: 31, in the context of 28-32.

²⁵⁸ Newbigin 1983b: 32.

dialogue with other patterns of thought is ‘a further step which Polanyi does not take’.²⁵⁹ By this, Newbigin is not saying that he is going beyond Polanyi in the sense of arguing against him. After all, the rich ‘Polanyian’ language of the above quotations indicates once more that Newbigin is taking a similar ‘line’. Rather, he is applying a Polanyian structure to an issue that Polanyi does not himself specifically address.²⁶⁰

(c) *The gospel as ‘public’ truth*

Newbigin’s use of Polanyi’s notion of ‘heuristic passion’ is summed up in his conception that the gospel constitutes ‘public truth’. This phrase has come to represent Newbigin’s programme *in parvo*, no doubt because of the way in which he uses it so often²⁶¹ but also because of the late prominence he gives to it.²⁶² We shall explore the significance of the term for Newbigin’s programme in more detail in chapter 4, but will here seek to show simply that the conception behind it is Polanyian in derivation. As with other elements in Newbigin’s programme, this connection has not been given the attention it warrants.²⁶³

It first occurs in *The Other Side of 1984*, in the context of a discussion about the cultural dichotomy between the ‘private option’ of religious faith and

²⁵⁹ Newbigin 1983b: 29.

²⁶⁰ We discuss this aspect of Newbigin’s thought in chapter 4.

²⁶¹ In all, Newbigin uses the phrase 126 times in his published writings.

²⁶² Note, for example, the use of the phrase as the subtitle to 1991f, as the article titles for 1991a; 1992e; and in the title of Newbigin’s contribution in 1997d. Cf. also the title of the Swanwick Conference (July 1992) ‘The Gospel as Public Truth’ (for which 1992b is the ‘Conference Call’).

²⁶³ E.g., Williams (1993) makes a connection between Newbigin’s epistemology and the work of Polanyi in its distinction between ‘knowledge’ and ‘belief’ (14-15), and also in the debate about the ‘liberal/fundamentalist’ divide (19), but does not make the connection between Polanyi and the ‘public truth’ dimension of Newbigin’s programme (20-24). Hunsberger (1998a) does not mention the concept.

those generally accepted ‘facts’ which are established by what he calls the ‘principles which govern public life’.²⁶⁴ He continues:

These ‘principles’ belong to the realm of ‘public truth’, that is to say to the area which is governed by the truths which are either held to be self-evident or can be shown to be true to any person who is willing to consider all the evidence.²⁶⁵

This statement occurs within the first prolonged discussion in Newbigin’s writings of Polanyi’s ideas – in particular his view that what contemporary culture needs is an ‘alternative’ to the ‘objectivist’ stranglehold that is suffocating the quest for true knowledge, and his proposal ‘to restore to us once more the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs’.²⁶⁶ It is in this context that Newbigin poses the question: ‘In what sense, then, is Polanyi asking for anything new?’ After all, faith has always been ‘unproven’. Nonetheless, the ‘newness’ of Polanyi’s proposal – argues Newbigin – is that it calls for nothing less than a cultural renewal upon a radically new understanding of what the process of ‘knowing’ is all about. It is within this context that Newbigin’s phrase ‘public truth’ corresponds most closely to Polanyi’s conception of ‘heuristic passion’.²⁶⁷ As he puts it:

What is now being proposed is that not just in the private world but also in the public world another model for understanding is needed: that this in turn requires the acknowledgment that our most fundamental beliefs cannot be demonstrated but are held by faith; that it is the responsibility of the Church to offer this new model for understanding as the basis for a radical renewal of our culture; and that without such radical renewal our culture has no future.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁴ Newbigin 1983b: 26.

²⁶⁵ Newbigin 1983b: 26.

²⁶⁶ Newbigin 1983b: 26 (quoting Polanyi 1958: 268).

²⁶⁷ For the connection between the phrase and the wider Polanyian framework, see e.g., Newbigin 1988g: 151-153; 1988e: 105-106; 1989g: 6; 1989f: 35, 48; 1990s: 7; 1991f: 53; 1995d: 39, 47, 50.

²⁶⁸ Newbigin 1983b: 27.

What this amounts to therefore is:

... an invitation to the Church to be bold in offering to the men and women of our culture a way of understanding which makes no claim to be demonstrable in the terms of 'modern' thought, which is not 'scientific' in the popular use of that word, which is based unashamedly on the revelation of God made in Jesus Christ and attested in scripture and the tradition of the Church, and which is offered as a fresh starting point for the exploration of the mystery of human existence and for coping with its practical tasks not only in the private and domestic life of the believers but also in the public life of the citizen.²⁶⁹

In conclusion, therefore, we may state that Newbigin's notion of 'public truth' is one which captures Polanyi's idea of 'heuristic passion' and frames it within a missiological and proclamatory context. As with Polanyi, it is impossible to isolate the 'public' aspects of this passionate commitment from the 'fiduciary' foundations upon which it is built. Both aspects are integrally connected.

2.4 Conclusion: Newbigin and the Polanyi thesis

The influence that Polanyi's writings have had on Newbigin is clearly considerable, as we have tried to demonstrate, and may be summarised in the following points.

Firstly, Newbigin adopts Polanyi's critical diagnosis of Western culture that the 'fuel' of Greek rationalism is now exhausted, and that the 'critical framework' has all but 'burnt away'.

Secondly, he assimilates Polanyi's basic critique of the Enlightenment programme with its sharp distinction – attributed to such thinkers as Descartes

²⁶⁹ Newbigin 1983b: 27.

and Locke – between the world of ‘facts’ and the world of ‘values’; between knowledge that is held to be ‘public’ and that which is restricted as ‘private’.

Thirdly, he follows Polanyi in arguing that what is needed in this context is nothing less than a renewal of culture characterised by an epistemological return to the Augustinian insight enshrined in the catch-phrase: *Credo ut intelligam*.

Fourthly, he adopts Polanyi’s understanding of ‘tacit’ knowledge and develops this as a way of addressing the missiological question of how the Church is to engage the culture of the West. By ‘indwelling’ the Christian story, the Church both grows in its own understanding, and arrives at a fuller grasp of reality. By the same ‘indwelling’, the Church is enabled to become the ‘hermeneutic of the gospel’, as a result of which outsiders to the Christian faith may come to grasp the gospel’s meaning as they see it authenticated in the life of believers.

Fifthly, he assimilates Polanyi’s connection between ‘commitment’ and ‘publication’. By doing so he articulates an understanding of ‘truth’ which must be declared publicly, though momentarily unproven. In this declaration as ‘public truth’, the veracity of faith-claims is placed in the public domain so that it may be ‘tested’ by a process of ‘dialogue’ and shown to be more adequate than other claims to deal with the complexities of life.

Chapter Three

Newbigin and the Challenge of Postmodernity

3.1 Introduction

Our analysis of Newbigin's thought in the previous chapter was developed on the basis that it is best interpreted within a 'Polanyian' framework. The present chapter takes this analysis a stage further and argues that because Polanyi's thought is conducive to central streams of postmodern thinking – for example, his conviction about the role of local communities in the shaping and passing on of the 'traditions' of knowledge – Newbigin's own thought may profitably be interpreted not simply in terms of its reaction to modernity, but also in relation to the questions confronting the Church in the cultural transition to postmodernity. Such an analysis of Newbigin's work is itself almost unknown, but if the case put forward in the last chapter is established it is long overdue.¹

Although Newbigin's formal interaction with the questions of 'postmodernity' is limited to his latest writings, nonetheless, he may be said to contribute to the debate about the meaning and practice of mission in a 'postmodern' context at two significant levels. Firstly, he can be shown to have developed a missionary methodology which effectively anticipates many of the

¹ The only article to my knowledge that begins to address the issue in any formal sense – albeit briefly – is Hunsberger 1998c.

questions raised by contemporary postmodern perspectives; and secondly, the way in which he harnesses this methodology to the practice of mission can be said to be both appropriate and applicable within the postmodern environment.

In exploring these issues, the methodology of the chapter will be as follows. Firstly, we shall investigate Newbigin's own assessment of postmodernity, and map out his specific engagement with it. Secondly, we will use the framework put forward by Murphy and McClendon in order to draw some preliminary conclusions about the extent to which Newbigin may be considered a 'postmodern' thinker. Thirdly, we will address the question of the extent to which Newbigin's missiological programme may be said to 'anticipate' the postmodern paradigm. In order to explore this thesis, we will use Newbigin's discussions of Peter Berger's 'plausibility structures' and Alasdair MacIntyre's 'traditions of rationality' as 'test cases'. Finally, we will draw conclusions about the value and contribution of his work when viewed and interpreted in a postmodern context.

3.2 Newbigin's engagement with postmodernity

Newbigin's formal contribution to the debates about postmodernity were necessarily limited by the fact that they began to take centre stage in theological and missiological circles when he had already reached an advanced age.² But inasmuch as he does refer to this new movement, it is important first to address

² His interaction with modernity (let alone postmodernity) began only after he had 'retired'. He was 74 when *The Other Side of 1984* was published in 1983. Dating the advent of the debates within theological and missiological circles about the implications of *postmodernity* is difficult to pinpoint with any accuracy. Formally, the work of Diogenes Allen (Allen 1989) would have to be a significant marker point; also Griffin 1988. For an overview of the development of 'postmodern' theologies, cf. Tilley 1995, and Ward 1997.

the question of how Newbigin understood its ‘mood’ and ‘mindset’, and then to assess the conclusions he drew with regard to the challenges that it presented.

All Newbigin’s references to ‘postmodernity’ occur in his post-1991 writings.³ In essence he sees it as a movement that is fundamentally opposed to the ‘metanarratives’ of ‘modernity’. ‘The post-modernists tell us’, he writes in a 1992 edition of *The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter*, ‘that the days of the great “metanarrative” are over. They reject the story which sees the world-wide expansion of the civilization developed in Europe as the master-thread of history.’⁴ Newbigin develops this perspective in a 1992 paper entitled ‘Mission Agenda’ where he writes that:

Beginning from Nietzsche, the postmodernists are telling us that the so-called eternal truths are simply products of particular histories. There are no absolute eternal truths, there are only stories – metanarratives that make rival claims to authority in human affairs. The European narrative is only one among many, and as the recent responses to the five hundredth anniversary of the painful discovery of Christopher Columbus by the peoples of the Americas have reminded us, this narrative is now widely contested.⁵

In these places, Newbigin’s basic understanding of the postmodern viewpoint as a rejection of the concept of ‘metanarratives’ is further defined in two ways. Both of them may be described as ‘Nietzschean’ in the sense that they represent Nietzsche’s thought as it has been developed by postmodern writers like Foucault. The first is that postmodernity understands ‘eternal truths’ to be simply ‘products of particular histories’, and the second is that the advocacy of

³ Purely as a matter of linguistic usage, he uses the word-group ‘postmodern’ (with various suffixes) twenty times in his writings, and the word-group ‘post-modern’ (with various suffixes) thirty times. The phrase ‘post modern’ (without hyphen) occurs once.

⁴ Newbigin 1992c: 1. For the idea of postmodernity as the rejection of metanarrative, see also Newbigin 1993b: 343; 1995d: 27; 1997c: 4; 1998: 151.

⁵ Newbigin 1992h: 187.

‘master’ narratives opens up the likely charge that they represent an abuse of power.

This interpretative framework is further clarified in his 1993 article, ‘Religious Pluralism: a Missiological Approach’.⁶ Here he describes the term ‘post-modernism’ as ‘somewhat slippery’, but argues that it is ‘easy to identify the movement of thought which it denotes’.⁷ In what follows, the same features are outlined as before, but they are now articulated in a more narrowly epistemological framework. Accordingly, he writes of ‘post-modernism’ that:

Its main feature is the abandonment of any claim to know the truth in an absolute sense. Ultimate reality is not single but diverse and chaotic. Truth-claims are really concealed claims to power, and this applies as much to the claims of science as to those of religion.⁸

Claiming Nietzsche as the founding father of the postmodern movement, he continues that:

What Nietzsche and his modern disciples have done is to demonstrate that the so called ‘eternal truths of reason’ are in fact products of particular histories. There is no such thing as a supra-historical ‘reason’ standing above all actual human reasoning, which is always the reasoning of human beings in a particular cultural and historical situation. So we do not have any ‘eternal truths’; we have only narratives of how beliefs and ideas have been born and developed. There is no overarching ‘reason’ by which all particular claims to truth might be tested; there is only a vast variety of stories. No story can claim ‘truth’ in an exclusive sense. Ultimate reality (if such a phrase means anything) is incoherent. This is the radical pluralism with which we now have to deal.⁹

Newbigin’s interpretation of postmodernity therefore is characterized by its identification of the epistemological implications of the rejection of

⁶ Newbigin 1993f.

⁷ Newbigin 1993f: 231.

⁸ Newbigin 1993f: 231. For the influence of Foucault in this analysis, see Newbigin 1991d: 2; 1992d: 1, 4, 6; 1993b: 343; 1994d: 63; 1995d: 27, 73; and 1996c: 9.

⁹ Newbigin 1993f: 232.

metanarrative. Newbigin's concerns about the transition to postmodernity emerge accordingly along two connected lines of questioning. Firstly, in the light of this rejection, is the claim to exclusive truth which Christians espouse any longer possible in a radically pluralised context? Secondly, assuming that such confession *is* still possible, how do Christians counter the argument that their proclamation amounts to an abuse of power (and therefore is suspect on moral as well as ideological grounds)?

It is these twin themes which effectively dominate Newbigin's engagement with postmodernity. In the light of our discussion so far, it is no surprise to find that both of them are 'epistemologically' focussed – the first obviously so, and the second by implication. In order to assess his contribution in a postmodern context, it is important to see how he develops arguments in response to these questions.

3.2.1 Knowledge and 'radical pluralism'

The 'radical pluralism' that Newbigin describes challenges the epistemic status of any truth claim in the postmodern world – whether Christian or not. But in terms of Christianity itself, if there are no 'eternal truths' but only 'narratives of how beliefs and ideas have been born and developed',¹⁰ where does this leave religious faith? Is it simply another 'localised' narrative with no warrant outside the Church, simply one 'story' amongst many? Furthermore, if knowledge really is 'local', how is the contemporary experience of Christian communities

¹⁰ Newbigin 1993f: 232.

epistemically related to the truth status of the historical events witnessed to in the Bible? In responding to these questions, Newbigin addresses both the 'intramural' Christian debate about the relationship between contemporary experience and past event, as well as to the wider 'extramural' question about the legitimacy of faith within society at large.

As an example of his response to the former issue, we may refer to his argument in a 1991 edition of *The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter*, where he makes his first published reference to the challenge of postmodernity.¹¹ Here, the issue of relativism is raised by a query from certain 'puzzled theologians' as to 'which of the various brands' of Christianity he is referring to when he describes the Christian faith as 'public truth'.¹² This question contributes to the danger of relativism in Newbigin's view by implying that there is a radical dislocation between the variety of contemporary expressions of Christian 'faith' and the 'historical' gospel events that gave rise to them. His reply is that whereas 'Christianity is constantly changing . . . there is a Gospel which does not change and which provides the bench-mark against which varying brands of Christianity have to be assessed.'¹³

The way in which the Church as part and parcel of a wider culture understands its relationship to the gospel as a set of historical events is therefore an issue of crucial importance. He proceeds to develop a case which embraces both what we might call a 'normative', but also a 'developing' view of the

¹¹ Newbigin 1991a: 1: 'One of the obvious features of "modern" (as distinct from "post-modern") culture is the belief that there is available to us a body of "objective facts", a knowledge which is disinfected of all subjectivity, a kind of knowledge from which the knowing subject has been eliminated.'

¹² Newbigin 1991a: 1.

¹³ Newbigin 1991a: 1.

relationship between culture and history. In this context, Newbigin does not want to deny the fact that a culture is constantly developing in its understanding of past events through its evolving experiences and ways of thinking – in contrast to the ‘modernist’ view that removes the process of knowledge from the realm of personal experience. At the same time, he does not want to jettison the belief that the gospel events really happened and that – though culturally bound – the Christian community can have a real access to them. What emerges in Newbigin’s account, therefore, is a way of ‘knowing’ that is bounded on the one hand by an adherence to the testimony of the early Christians in the Scriptures (which provides the grounds for the historical assurance of belief), and on the other by a contemporary community that is continually interpreting and re-interpreting those words and events in the context of its present life.¹⁴

In defining his response, Newbigin charts familiar territory when he seeks to distinguish this approach to knowledge from its Enlightenment alternative. In doing so he writes that:

One of the obvious features of ‘modern’ (as distinct from ‘post-modern’) culture is the belief that there is available to us a body of ‘objective facts’, a knowledge which is disinfected of all subjectivity, a kind of knowledge from which the knowing subject has been eliminated.¹⁵

These comments about ‘post-modernity’ and its central tenets, are interesting for three reasons. Firstly, they imply that he is more than happy to embrace the more ‘subjective’ approach to ‘knowledge’ associated with ‘post-

¹⁴ Newbigin 1991a: 1: The Church ‘cannot merely repeat the words of creed or Scripture; that would be to negate the intention of Jesus who did not write a Qur’an but formed a community of fallible men and women. It cannot float away from the testimony of those first disciples to follow wherever the wind is blowing. It has to bring all the powers which contemporary culture may have equipped it to bear on the understanding of “what really happened”. And it has the promise of Jesus that the Spirit will lead us into the fullness of the truth.’

¹⁵ Newbigin 1991a: 1.

modern' thinking over against the unrealistic 'objectification' of knowledge characteristic of modernity. Secondly, they show that 'post-modern' assumptions about the impossibility of a 'detached' form of reason provide Newbigin with yet more ammunition with which to attack the basic Enlightenment assumptions about concepts like 'objectivity' and 'neutrality'. In writing therefore that 'One of the obvious features of "modern" (as distinct from "post-modern") culture is the belief that there is available to us a body of "objective facts"',¹⁶ Newbigin is presenting his position as already sympathetic with both the postmodern critique of modernity's supposed neutral objectivity and also with postmodernity's acknowledgement of the 'subjectivity' which should characterize true knowing.¹⁷ Thirdly, it is telling that both viewpoints are fundamentally Polanyian in outlook.¹⁸ Significantly therefore, Newbigin's existing framework which had already been in place for some years makes his thinking conducive to certain central postmodern assumptions when first he meets them.

¹⁶ Newbigin 1991a: 1.

¹⁷ Newbigin 1991a: 1.

¹⁸ Polanyi's rejection of 'neutral' standpoints stems from his reaction against the mindset of the communist regime in Hungary (from which he had fled) which distanced truth claims from the moral responsibilities attached to them. See his essays 'Beyond Nihilism' and 'The Message of the Hungarian Revolution' in Polanyi 1969; also 1958: 238-9; 1964: 78-79. Cf. also the discussion in Prosch 1986: 13-34. Likewise, his 'subjective' approach to truth and his advocacy of the concept of 'personal knowledge' can also be said to have grown out of this rejection. It is the outworking of the view that to claim truth involves a personal and moral responsibility. Newbigin's reading of Polanyi therefore makes him not only sympathetic with postmodernity's 'anti-Enlightenment' reaction toward such neutrality, but in addition sympathetic to the postmodern reaction against the abuse of power that often accompanies such claims. See Newbigin's discussion of Polanyi's background in Newbigin 1995c: 115-6. It is also suggestive that Polanyi, though chronologically prior to the contemporary postmodern era, comes from a background of communist oppression whose evils also motivated postmodern writers like Foucault or Lyotard in the France of the 1960s. This similarity of origin results in an intense suspicion of 'unifying discourses' in all three writers, though each develops his case in different ways.

3.2.2 Knowledge as culturally and socially embodied

If Newbigin's approach to epistemology opens him up sympathetically to the force of postmodern insights about the subjectivity of knowledge, he also appears to go a step further in accepting the postmodern assumption that all truth is – in his own phrase – 'socially and historically embodied'.¹⁹ This concession to the postmodern mindset tends to characterize his discussions about the legitimising of faith claims within society more generally (what we have called the 'extramural' aspects of postmodernity's pluralism).

In this context, the stress on the cultural location of knowledge is an insight about the nature of truth that Newbigin subsequently returns to on more than one occasion – and with open approval. For example, in a paper delivered in Dublin in 1992, he says that when '... postmodernists are telling us that the so-called eternal truths are simply products of particular histories', he expresses his approval of what is – in effect – a reversal of Lessing's dictum. He continues by asserting that: 'There is no exercise of human reason that is not socially embodied, rooted in a tradition that is carried by a language.'²⁰

The 'dictum' of Lessing quoted here is his statement that: 'accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.'²¹ By it Lessing intended to show that historical witness to past events (such as the resurrection) could never be used to establish the truth of Christian faith, so long as they were uncorroborated by present experience. 'Faith' and 'history' were

¹⁹ Newbigin 1992d: 2.

²⁰ Newbigin 1992h: 187. Note again the reference to Polanyi's notion of the fundamental link between communal traditions and the vehicle of 'language' (cf. Polanyi 1958: 269-298). Cf. Newbigin's use of this idea elsewhere (e.g., 1977a: 253; 1990s: 6; 1995d: 47).

²¹ From his essay, 'On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power' (reproduced in Chadwick 1956): 53.

separated therefore by an ‘ugly broad ditch’²² which was necessitated by the need for a rational approach to questions about the validity and viability of Christian belief. Newbigin’s point in quoting Lessing (and ‘reversing’ his dictum) is that whereas the outlook of ‘modernity’ established reason as an autonomous arbiter of truth, ‘*post-modernity*’ takes the position that the exercise of ‘rationality’ is itself simply the product of a particular way of thinking which has now been effectively relativised. All such ‘truths’ are the social and historical product of local ‘narratives’, and therefore cannot claim to be universal in their ‘truthfulness’.

This point of agreement with the thinking and assumptions of postmodernity is one that Newbigin frequently reiterates. For example, in a 1992 issue of *The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter* he replies to criticisms made against an earlier article (entitled ‘The Gospel as Public Truth’²³) in which he had attacked the modernist idea of truths as ‘timeless statements’. Here he states that, ‘In the post-modernist revolt against the Enlightenment Lessing’s logic is reversed: the so-called eternal truths of reason are in fact products of contingent facts of history.’ He then adds significantly: ‘I cannot help thinking that at this point Christians are on the side of the post-modernists.’²⁴ Or, more recently, he writes in *Proper Confidence*, ‘I have argued (in agreement with the postmodernists) that all truth claims are culturally and historically embodied.’²⁵

²² Chadwick 1956: 55. The German phrase is ‘garstiger breiter Graben’.

²³ Newbigin 1991a.

²⁴ Newbigin 1992d: 2-3.

²⁵ Newbigin 1995d: 97 (also 73). For further references to Newbigin’s concession to the ‘post-modern’ assumptions about knowledge being socially and historically embodied, see e.g. 1992d: 6: ‘The post-modernists, if I understand rightly, have neatly stood Lessing on his head. The so-called “eternal truths of reason” are in fact products of particular histories. . . . It seems to me that, at this point, the Christian has to side with the post-modernists against the Enlightenment’; and 1993f: 233: ‘We accept the post-modernist position that all human reasoning is socially, culturally, historically embodied.’

This understanding of knowledge owes more to the postmodern idea of ‘localised truth’ than it does to the Enlightenment notion about truth’s ‘timelessness’. What is significant for an understanding of Newbigin’s positioning is that as far as the cultural transition to *post*modernity is concerned, he is once more siding with the newer position *against* the older. In other words, he takes the postmodern assault against the assumptions of modernity and adopts it as his own. To this extent, therefore, Newbigin not only recognizes the change in perspective but identifies himself with it.

But this acknowledgement by Newbigin of the postmodern insight about the localised nature of knowledge raises the question of ‘relativism’ in a more acute form. Radical postmodernists argue that it inevitably leads to scepticism about any claim to universality in the realm of truth.²⁶ Newbigin is aware of this possible conclusion and addresses it in his lecture on the theme of ‘Pluralism and the Church’ at the 2nd ‘Gospel and Our Culture Conference’ in 1991.²⁷ Here again we will follow his argument through before returning to a wider assessment.

In the lecture itself, Newbigin explains that as far as he is concerned, the reality of cultural pluralism (that of different cultures living alongside each other and claiming authenticity for their actions) raises two related problems. The first (the lesser in Newbigin’s eyes) is the issue of ethical behaviour. ‘Can there be

²⁶ Lyon quotes Foucault’s comment that he prefers ‘what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems’ (Lyon 1994: 76 citing Rabinow 1984 without page reference). For a theological espousal of this perspective (consciously following Derrida and Foucault), cf. Graham and Walton 1991: 5, who conclude their 1991 critique of Newbigin and the ‘Gospel and our Culture’ movement with the judgement: ‘Better the sound of many voices than the single and authoritarian voice of the Father. It is possible to see exciting new forms of Christian theology emerging from such heteroglossalia and local knowledges.’

²⁷ Held at Swanwick Conference Centre in April of that year.

criteria for behaviour beyond those that are provided within each culture?'²⁸ The second is more fundamental in Newbigin's opinion and underlies questions about the possible cultural relativity of ethics. It is that of epistemology. This he frames in the following terms:

. . . can there be any criterion of truth, or is all claim to knowledge so culturally conditioned that we have to live in a world of total relativism? In other words, is pluralism fatal to the claim to know the truth? Can there be affirmation of truth in a pluralist world, in a world where we have to acknowledge pluralism?²⁹

In developing his response to these questions, Newbigin (again relying significantly upon the insights of Polanyi) points to the example of the scientific community as an appropriate paradigm of an organization 'which is pluralist without falling into relativism'.³⁰ 'The scientific community is pluralist,' Newbigin argues, in the sense that 'there is no central control determining who shall research into what questions and on what lines.'³¹ For this reason, he argues, it is 'pluralist', or 'multi-centered.' He continues:

But it is not pluralist in the relative sense. If scientists in Tokyo and Cambridge come up with different views about the structure of the atom, the Cambridge dons do not say 'well that may be true for them in Tokyo but it is not true for us'. There is a struggle. There is a continuous battle to test. The findings of the different scholars are published, they are open to criticism.³²

Newbigin then proceeds to defend this notion against the charge that the 'truth' established by this method is finally subjective:

. . . how are the findings of science saved from subjectivity? Not because their truth can be demonstrated from some centre outside the culture of science. Their truth is established, if it is, firstly, by the fact that the findings are published, are

²⁸ Newbigin 1991c: 2.

²⁹ Newbigin 1991c: 2-3.

³⁰ Newbigin 1991c: 4.

³¹ Newbigin 1991c: 4.

³² Newbigin 1991c: 4.

made available to everyone with the belief that if they are true they are true for everyone and therefore . . . must be published; and secondly that the scientist takes the responsibility by publishing. . . . (F)inally the affirmation is tested in all kinds of situations. There is no other basis for the claim that science gives us true knowledge of what is the case apart from this.³³

The basis for this kind of knowledge is further distinguished from the foundationalism offered by the Enlightenment by its rootedness not in a series of neutral propositions or ‘facts’, but in a ‘story’, the story of God’s dealings with the world, recorded in the Bible:

Now that is a different kind of coherence from the one offered by the Enlightenment. It’s a coherence which is centered in a story, and a person, and which as we know from our experience in the life of the church makes it possible for an immense variety of different cultures and, therefore, different ways of understanding the world to live together in mutual trust and confidence. So the church is a plural society, but it is not a clueless pluralism. It is not a relativistic pluralism.³⁴

Newbigin’s use of this Polanyian notion of knowledge as a way through the impasse of modernity leads him, therefore, into territory which appears to be ‘postmodern’ in that it accepts the principle of ‘local’ knowledge as espoused by writers such as Foucault.³⁵ Newbigin is happy to make this concession as we have seen and even counts ‘postmoderns’ as ‘allies’ in the argument against the ‘modernist’ stress on objectivism. ‘Ironically,’ he writes accordingly, ‘the post-modernists could be our allies in protesting against the rationalist impasse.’³⁶ Newbigin specifically defends this alliance, for example, as he addresses the question of apologetics in a postmodern context. The following words are taken

³³ Newbigin 1991c: 5. The available transcript of the lecture leaves some infelicities of style!

³⁴ Newbigin 1991c: 7.

³⁵ Newbigin refers to Foucault with approval in this context (e.g., Newbigin 1992d: 6, where, having written of postmodernity’s belief that: ‘The so-called “eternal truths of reason” are in fact products of particular histories’ he comments that – as a result ‘. . . we have *The Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche) and *the Archaeology of the Social Sciences* (Foucault).’ He concludes that: ‘It seems to me that, at this point, the Christian has to side with the post-modernists against the Enlightenment’). Cf. also Newbigin 1995d: 73.

from a 1992 paper, given at the Congress of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft

Missionarischer Arbeit in Hanover, which are indicative of his approach:

I want to suggest that in our concern to communicate the gospel to our European home, we can regard the postmodernists as allies up to a certain point. It is the simple truth that all human beliefs about the world are rooted in particular histories. Human thought is not disembodied; it is part of human history. All of it is historically and culturally conditioned. There is no supracultural truth.³⁷

In this context:

Among all the stories that human beings tell about themselves and the world, there could be a true story. No logic requires us to deny this possibility. And this, of course, is what the Christian Church confesses. We believe and confess that there is a true story that gives the clue to the meaning of the whole human and cosmic story, because God has chosen a people to be the bearer of the meaning of the whole story. This is the story the Bible tells, with its center in the incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our task is to tell this story.³⁸

He makes a similar point in his 1993 article, 'Religious Pluralism: a Missiological Approach' where once more, he views the postmodern turn as supportive in the continuing task of evangelism and apologetics.³⁹ Here, having agreed with the postmodernist position about the cultural embodiment of 'all human reasoning' and rejecting the Enlightenment illusion that '... there is available some kind of neutral stand-point from which one could judge the different stories and decide which is true',⁴⁰ he goes on to advocate that in this context, the Christian response is one in which, 'We tell our story,' even though 'it is only one among the many stories.'⁴¹

³⁶ Newbigin 1992k: 23.

³⁷ Newbigin 1992k: 202.

³⁸ Newbigin 1992k: 203.

³⁹ Newbigin 1993f.

⁴⁰ Newbigin 1993f: 233.

⁴¹ Newbigin 1993f: 233.

Newbigin is aware that this position opens him up to the possible charge of fideism,⁴² but insists that to tell the story is simply a response to a divine commission. He writes accordingly that:

We are commissioned to bring good news, to tell the story of God's marvellous and mighty acts for the salvation of the world. We must not withhold this story from anyone. To keep it to ourselves, as though it were a private 'in-house' story of the Church, as though Jesus were the lord of Christians but not the lord of all, would be intolerable sectarianism. We have no right to keep silent about it, and if we try to do so we deny its truth.⁴³

3.2.3 Knowledge as the 'will to power'

The other aspect of the epistemological question that Newbigin deals with as part of the postmodern turn, concerns the use of power. This discussion is connected both to his analysis of pluralism, and to his advocacy of the scientific community as a prime example of what he describes as a 'committed pluralism'. By this he refers to its 'commitment to search for the truth, a commitment that implies the belief that the truth can be known – not fully and completely, but in part and with increasing depth and range and coherence'.⁴⁴ But the logic of this point of view leads inevitably to a position in which the truth claims of the story that Christians present are considered to be potentially oppressive by a culture

⁴² Newbigin 1993f: 236.

⁴³ Newbigin 1993f: 241. Also, 1992h: 187: 'We stand among all other human beings with their different stories to bear witness to what God has done. We do so because we have been laid hold of and commissioned to do so.'

⁴⁴ Newbigin 1991f: 168. He contrasts this notion with that of 'agnostic pluralism' ('a situation in which it is assumed that ultimate truth is unknowable and that there are therefore no criteria by which different beliefs and different patterns of behavior may be judged. In this situation one belief is as good as another and one lifestyle is as good as another. No judgments are to be made, for there are no given criteria, no truth by which error could be recognized. There is to be no discrimination between better and worse. All beliefs and all lifestyles are to be equally respected.') For a development of these notions see e.g., 1988c: 168, and 1991f: 56f., 60f., 85f..

that is deeply suspicious about the abuse of power. If Newbigin wants to uphold the idea of ‘the story as public truth’,⁴⁵ does this not amount to an imposition of a ‘regime of truth’ (to use Foucault’s phrase)? Or as Newbigin himself expresses it:

It is characteristic of the ‘post-modern’ situation that claims to truth are regarded as concealed assertions of power. In this perspective, evangelism is seen as an expression of the will to dominate, and dialogue is seen as the renunciation of this desire.⁴⁶

Newbigin is sensitive to this aspect of the postmodern critique, not least because it so directly challenges his thesis at the point where he wishes to establish the ‘public’ nature of truth, and to encourage Christians to publish the good news ‘with universal intent’. Indeed, not to do so would represent a denial of its intrinsic nature *as* truth. As he puts it: ‘We have no right to keep silent about it, and if we try to do so we deny its truth.’⁴⁷ So the force of the critique is real, and Newbigin understands the nature of it. The ‘typically post-modern situation’ he writes, is one ‘in which any statement of truth is examined, not with the question, “Is it true?” but with the question “whose interests is it serving?” “Whose power is it trying to assert?”’⁴⁸

There are three stages in Newbigin’s response to this challenge. In the first place, he argues that *every* assertion of ‘truth’ is actually an expression of ‘power’.⁴⁹ As a result, one cannot escape the claim to truth of any and every public utterance. In this sense, *all* narratives carry within themselves the

⁴⁵ Newbigin 1991c: 9.

⁴⁶ Newbigin 1993f: 240.

⁴⁷ See e.g., Newbigin 1993f: 241.

⁴⁸ Newbigin 1991c: 4 (also 3). For further references to the idea of ‘truth’ statements as assertions of power, cf. 1988c: 161, 170; 1990s: 4; 1991f: 3, 29-30; 1996c: 77.

⁴⁹ Newbigin 1991c: 3: ‘Affirmations of truth . . . are merely assertions of power.’

potential for oppression, and must therefore be intrinsically and characteristically narratives of ‘power’. ‘There are only stories,’ he writes, ‘and the Christian story is one among them. These stories are, as the post-modernists correctly perceive, also claims to power.’⁵⁰

But, secondly, Newbigin argues that the relationships involved in the process of knowing do not in fact set up the kinds of ‘power structures’ attacked by the postmodernists. The relationship of the Christian ‘knower’ to the object of his ‘knowledge’ is not to be characterised as one of ‘possession’. The Christian disciple is by contrast a ‘seeker’ after truth: one who is ‘invited’ or ‘drawn’ into further truth, rather than one who takes ‘possession’ of it. Accordingly, the true Christian is not a ‘captor’ of truth but one who is taken captive *by* it. He is on the way to an ever-deeper appreciation of the truth through a process of self-giving and ‘indwelling’. Newbigin expresses this concept in the following way:

I find the locus of truth in a story of which I am a part. I see my relation to truth as being not that of a possessor but of a seeker who trusts that he is on a path that leads to further understanding, but who knows that full understanding of the truth is something promised only at the final consummation of the story.⁵¹

He uses similar language elsewhere: ‘Truth is a future assurance which beckons,’ he writes, ‘not a possession of our own’.⁵² Or again:

Christian discipleship is an exploration – spiritual, intellectual, practical – of the real world from this starting point. The ‘certainty’ of a Christian is not (or ought not to be) a claim to possess full and unrevisable truth. It is a personal trust in one who has proved trustworthy.⁵³

⁵⁰ Newbigin 1993f: 233.

⁵¹ Newbigin 1992d: 7.

⁵² Newbigin 1991e: 2.

⁵³ Newbigin 1992a: 2.

The concept of ‘personal’ trust in God is therefore irreconcilable with the idea of ‘possession’, but involves the altogether different ideas of ‘relatedness’ and ‘fellowship’. Moreover, the claim to ‘possess’ the truth is tantamount to godlessness, for it denies the priority of faith as the only grounds for certainty, and thereby falls back into a false Enlightenment belief in some kind of neutrally objective truth. As he puts it:

Here is the heart of the matter. A kind of ‘indubitable certainty’ which claims to possess knowledge is all part of our alienation from God. The reality is a gracious God who leads us into a knowledge of Him by a love which calls forth the commitment of faith. Faith is not a claim to indubitable and irreformable certainty. It is a personal and total personal commitment to the One who is able to lead us into truth in its fullness.⁵⁴

The third level of Newbigin’s response to the charge about ‘power’ is to argue that although Christianity may rightly be numbered amongst what he calls the ‘master-narratives’, it is nonetheless ‘in one vital respect unique’.⁵⁵

Its uniqueness can most simply be indicated by saying that from start to finish it is marked by the sign of the cross. Every ‘master-narrative’ has an in-built tendency to imperialism, because it looks for an intra-historical triumph of the truth for which it stands. Christians (God forgive us) have frequently been seduced into thinking and acting in precisely this way. But when they are so seduced, and we still are, they deny the true story. At the centre of the Christian story stands the fact that the incarnate Lord, by whom and for whom all things exist, suffered rejection and death. That fact precludes any expectation that there can be a total union of truth and power within history.⁵⁶

3.2.4 Summary

In the context of the epistemological implications of postmodernity’s

⁵⁴ Newbigin 1993b: 350.

⁵⁵ Newbigin 1992d: 8.

⁵⁶ Newbigin 1992d: 8; also 1993f: 234f..

rejection of metanarrative, therefore, it is by the appeal to the Christian ‘story’ that Newbigin seeks to circumvent the challenges posed by the onset of postmodern relativism. By doing so, he seeks to maintain the connection between the witness of the apostles to the historical gospel events with the contemporary witness of Christians today. Moreover, his appeal to the ‘story’ also represents a rebuttal of the challenge that such proclamation is an abuse of power. For such witness is to be marked by the intrinsic nature of the story itself – a story of a rejected and crucified Lord, who nonetheless is the only Lord. He writes accordingly:

As I understand it, the Christian claim to be on the way to truth does not rest on supposedly infallible ‘eternal truths’ which are indubitable and therefore leave no place for the risky exercise of faith, but on the essential reliability of a story, a story involving fallible human beings in their response to the call of God, a story of which the point has been disclosed in the action of God in the incarnation of the Word in Jesus. It is this which gives us the clue for the interpretation of the whole story. I suggest (and it would need a long essay to justify this) that this way of understanding the truth is alone capable of withstanding the attack of the post-modernists and deconstructionists on the possibility of any such thing as truth.⁵⁷

3.3 Is Newbigin a ‘postmodern’ thinker?

How then do we assess the extent to which Newbigin may be regarded as a ‘postmodern’ thinker? To a greater or lesser degree, any estimate of what is and what is not ‘postmodern’ carries a large measure of subjectivity. What is ‘postmodern’ to one analyst is not to another, depending upon the nature of the criteria set forward. So, for example, George Lindbeck is considered

⁵⁷ Newbigin 1991d: 3.

‘postmodern’ by some,⁵⁸ whilst he is considered ‘ultra-modern’, or even ‘premodern’ by others.⁵⁹ Similarly, a writer like Alasdair MacIntyre is considered to be a representative of “benign” postmodernism’ by John Milbank,⁶⁰ or as providing an example of ‘postmodern ethics’ by Murphy and McClendon⁶¹ (in both cases because of his commitment to a ‘communitarian’ understanding of morality as the only viable framework for understanding the nature and function of rational discourse). Other writers – such as David Lyon – consider MacIntyre to be an example of ‘*pre*-modernity’ because of his appeal to an Aristotelian notion of rationality.⁶²

Inevitably also, different writers can simultaneously be considered from different perspectives and judged accordingly. The two perceptions of MacIntyre as being in some senses ‘postmodern’ and in others ‘premodern’, for example, may be argued to be equally defensible from his writings, but this observation does not necessarily mean that there is a fundamental internal contradiction when his work is viewed in an overall perspective.⁶³ In this sense, writers like MacIntyre could be regarded as both ‘postmodern’ *and* ‘premodern’ depending upon the trajectory taken.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ E.g., Murphy and McClendon (Murphy and McClendon 1989: 207) consider him ‘through and through postmodern’.

⁵⁹ Tilley for example (Tilley 1995: 106) argues that he is ‘premodern’ rather than ‘postmodern’ because he is still committed to a realist notion of truth.

⁶⁰ Milbank 1990b: 326.

⁶¹ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 203: it is postmodern ‘in the degree that his theoretical work transcends the individualism of the modern period without falling back into premodern modes of thought’.

⁶² Lyon 1994: 82 (or Tilley, as above). Lyon places MacIntyre in the same category as Milbank, only with Augustine substituted for Aristotle.

⁶³ See e.g., the discussion of his work in Middleton and Walsh 1995b: 66f..

⁶⁴ Or perhaps better, he sees the only way through the impasse of the postmodern tendency towards nihilism is by recovering a premodern narrative discourse of rationality. See further, chapter 4.

3.3.1 Towards some definitions

Notwithstanding the multi-faceted nature of this type of analysis (perhaps itself inevitable within the contemporary scene), and alongside it the inevitability of some measure of subjectivity, we shall follow the framework of Nancey Murphy and James McClendon in assessing Newbigin's work.⁶⁵ In their article 'Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies', they develop what they describe as a 'three-dimensional conceptual "space"' for mapping 'modern' thought, and then proceed to 'define postmodern thought negatively by describing its departure from modern conceptual "space" defined by these three axes.'⁶⁶

(i) *Modernity*

The style of thought characterized as 'modern' is defined by Murphy and McClendon along three 'tracks' or 'axes' – an 'epistemological axis, a linguistic axis, and a metaphysical axis'.⁶⁷ These three axes in turn represent 'three central philosophical theses that have dominated modern thought.'⁶⁸ These they describe as follows:

The first is epistemological foundationalism – the view that knowledge can be justified only by finding indubitable 'foundational' beliefs upon which it is constructed. The second is the representational-expressivist theory of language – the view that language must gain its primary meaning by representing the objects or facts to which it refers; otherwise it merely expresses the attitudes of the speaker. . . . The third pillar of modern thought is atomism or reductionism – an attempt to understand reality by reducing it to its smallest parts. Here we find the modern approach to ethics and political philosophy, which sees the

⁶⁵ Murphy and McClendon 1989.

⁶⁶ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 191.

⁶⁷ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 191.

⁶⁸ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 192.

individual as prior to the community, and the community as merely a collection of like individuals, a mass.⁶⁹

Epistemological foundationalism

The roots of ‘epistemological foundationalism’ are traced back through the Vienna Circle of the logical positivists to David Hume and the British empiricists, and finally to René Descartes. However, whilst foundationalism on a Cartesian basis implies the possibility of epistemological certainty, it also involves the counter image of ‘doubt’ and a resulting scepticism – particularly when the search for certainty breaks down. At the positive end of this axis therefore lies an ‘optimistic’ brand of foundationalism (represented by Descartes himself) and at the other end a more pessimistic ‘scepticism’ (represented – though not without qualification – by David Hume).

Representational-expressivist theories of language

The second axis of modernity defined by Murphy and McClendon is based upon its presupposition that the meaning of language is determined by its ability to ‘represent’ the external objects to which it refers.⁷⁰ However, not all language could however be understood in this sense. Ethical statements for example do not ‘refer’ directly to external objects, but rather express the ‘emotions’ or ‘attitudes’ of their adherents. As a result of this, ‘expressivist’ theories of language were also developed to make sense of this further dimension.

⁶⁹ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 192.

⁷⁰ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 193f..

These differing approaches to the understanding of language were not as polar in their relationship as the ‘optimistic’ and ‘pessimistic’ dimensions of the ‘epistemological’ axis. Nonetheless, Murphy and McClendon argue that they are related in the sense that, ‘the importance attached to the expressivist theory will vary according to one’s optimism regarding the ability of the representational theory to account for all significant discourse.’⁷¹ Descartes represented the early form of ‘representationalism’ with Locke and Hume (followed in some respects by Bertrand Russell and the ‘early’ Wittgenstein) in a more centralist position - straddling both the ‘representational’ and ‘expressivist’ understandings, whilst the moral philosopher C.L. Stevenson represented a purer ‘expressivist’ position.

Individualist-collectivist theories of reality

The third axis is described by Murphy and McClendon as ‘individualist-collectivist’. At its heart, they argue, the Enlightenment project tended towards an ‘atomism or reductionism’ by its ‘attempt to understand reality by reducing it to its smallest parts’.⁷² This was largely because its primary thinkers sought to relocate the locus of authority within the individual, rather than in the external authority of the Church or State. As a result of this relocation, the newer understanding of the relationship between the individual and the community – in the areas of modern ethics and political philosophy for example – ‘sees the individual as prior to the community, and the community as merely a collection of like individuals, a mass.’⁷³

⁷¹ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 194.

⁷² Murphy and McClendon 1989: 192.

⁷³ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 192.

The roots of this radical form of ‘individualism’ are once more traced back to Descartes, whose successors (like Thomas Hobbes) understood the ‘individual’ as the primary category, and the ‘group’ or ‘society’ as simply a collection or gathering of such individuals. At the other end of this axis stands the ‘collectivist’ view (pre-eminently represented in the modern era by Karl Marx) who viewed ideas such as ‘class’ or ‘nation’ as the *primary* social category, and therefore as logically prior to any understanding of the individual.

In concluding this part of their analysis, Murphy and McClendon argue that these three ‘axes’ – functioning within the extremes of ‘foundationalism’ and ‘scepticism’ in epistemology, ‘representationalism’ and ‘expressivism’ in linguistics, and ‘individualism’ and ‘collectivism’ in the social sciences – ‘are related to one another and define . . . a three-dimensional space in which modern thinkers can be located.’⁷⁴

(ii) *Postmodernity*

On this basis, Murphy and McClendon propose to define as ‘postmodern’, ‘any mode of thought that departs from the three modern axes described above without reverting to premodern categories.’⁷⁵

Epistemology

In terms of epistemology, for example, they argue that the ‘postmodern’ reaction can most characteristically be seen in the account of knowledge set out

⁷⁴ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 198.

⁷⁵ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 199.

by Willard Quine, which represents a rejection of earlier forms of ‘foundationalism’. They quote from his *Two Dogmas of Experience* (1951) as follows:

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience. A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions adjustments in the interior of the field. Truth values have to be redistributed over some statements. Re-evaluation of some statements entails re-evaluation of others, because of their logical interconnections – the logical laws being in turn simply certain further elements of the field.⁷⁶

In this understanding, an epistemic ‘system’ is self-contained and self-coherent, conditioning the thought patterns and perceptions of its inhabitants. When fresh experience at the periphery leads to the formulation of new beliefs, the coherence of the ‘interior of the field’ of knowledge may need to be re-evaluated and re-adjusted to incorporate the new idea. Consequently, as Murphy and McClendon put it: ‘Postmodern epistemology moves toward a new form of pragmatism in attempting to answer the question “Why this network (this rearrangement) rather than another?”’⁷⁷ In this way of thinking, the manner in which ‘facts’ are understood is determined by the systems of belief which operate within the particular communities concerned. There is no way of extracting them from this framework, nor of analysing them outside of the communities in which they are upheld.⁷⁸

In a parallel manner, the work of Thomas Kuhn in the philosophy of science established the notion that *scientific* ‘facts’ are in reality ‘theory-laden’.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Murphy and McClendon 1989: 200.

⁷⁷ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 200.

⁷⁸ Cf. our parallel discussion in chapter 1 in relation to Lyotard.

and are integrally related to the ‘belief’ systems of the communities out of which they emerge.⁷⁹ Like Quine, he believed that science is intra-systemically ‘holistic’ in the sense that its ‘knowledge’ (i.e., the sum total of beliefs held within its ‘community’) is itself a ‘fabric’ whose contours are established by the assumptions held within the scientific community as a whole. But he built on the insights of Quine by his particular interest in what happens when wholesale revolutions take place in a community’s ‘fabric’ of knowledge. At these moments of crisis, when an existing ‘paradigm’ of thought is no longer found to be adequate to the challenges it faces, he argued that a ‘paradigm shift’ results and a new ‘paradigm’ begins to take its place.⁸⁰

What is intrinsic to the epistemology of postmodernity therefore is that understandings about the ‘locus’ and ‘provenance’ of knowledge have shifted, with older ‘realist’ approaches being replaced by more ‘localised’ conceptions. In these, the frameworks of belief inherent within different traditions are determinative of what is believed to be true within the community in question.

Language

Moving to the connected field of ‘language’, Murphy and McClendon illustrate the shift from modernity to postmodernity by contrasting the earlier

⁷⁹ Cf. Kuhn 1970c. Kuhn’s thought and its influence on Newbigin is explored in greater detail in chapter 4.

⁸⁰ E.g., Kuhn 1970c: esp. 92-110. See e.g., 92: ‘Political revolutions are inaugurated by a growing sense, often restricted to a segment of the political community, that existing institutions have ceased adequately to meet the problems posed by an environment that they have in part created. In much the same way, scientific revolutions are inaugurated by a growing sense, again often restricted to a narrow subdivision of the scientific community, that an existing paradigm has ceased to function adequately in the exploration of an aspect of nature to which that paradigm itself had previously led the way.’ See his references to the work of Quine in Kuhn 1970c: vi, 202.

work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (in which he attempted to develop a more fully ‘referential’ understanding of language) with his later work in the late 1930s and 1940s. His work in this latter period (along with the speech-act theories of J.L. Austin) effectively revolutionised linguistic theory. As a result Murphy and McClendon argue that:

Heretofore, reference had been seen as the key to meaning; from this point on it is used of language in discourse. Heretofore the proposition, the bare assertion of a fact, had been the paradigm for all language; from this point on, the multiple uses of language and its many complex relations to the world, to the speakers, and to hearers came to be appreciated.⁸¹

In this newer framework, the understanding of language is broadened from a purely ‘representational’ basis, and begins to take account of the social context in which words are used. Wittgenstein developed this understanding and (in contrast to his earlier work) focussed on the idea of languages as being themselves ‘forms of life’. His conception of ‘language games’ explored the notion that there is a plurality of ways in which language itself relates to the world. ‘Thanks to Wittgenstein and Austin’, write Murphy and McClendon, ‘the attempt to understand meaning solely in terms of its representational force has generally been abandoned.’⁸² In a post-Wittgensteinian world, they conclude that:

... one’s point of attack in understanding an age will no longer be the study of its ideas (as it was for Hegel), but the study of grammar – not, say, English grammar, but the way in which crucial words such as ‘knowledge’, ‘true’, ‘God’, etc. fit into typical language games.⁸³

⁸¹ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 201.

⁸² Murphy and McClendon 1989: 202.

⁸³ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 202.

Social science

Finally, turning to the social sciences, Murphy and McClendon argue that postmodernity tends to move away from ‘individualist’ notions of morality towards what they call a collectivist ‘corporate metaphysics’. They take Alasdair MacIntyre’s work as an example of an approach that takes seriously ‘an understanding of corporate life’ as the only basis for illuminating notions of morality such as ‘virtue’.⁸⁴ It is in the social realm, rather than in an emphasis upon the individual that an understanding of morality has to be focussed. It is ‘the *traditions* of family, profession, tribe, or nation, that determine one’s starting point in life’, and – as a result – it is these that ‘must be taken into account in determining what is or is not virtuous.’⁸⁵ Hence, in a postmodern framework, the individual is not logically prior to the community, but is shaped by the role he or she performs within the ongoing history of a communal tradition. MacIntyre’s views therefore ‘turn away’ from the ‘individualist-collectivist’ axis of modernity, in the threefold sense that: the individual is not thought to be prior to the community; the older polarisation between individual and collective good is done away with; and the ‘generic’ understanding of society is abandoned in favour of the approach which evaluates the contribution of individuals to the collective good.

3.3.2 Some preliminary observations

As has already been pointed out, other perspectives and approaches may

⁸⁴ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 203f..

⁸⁵ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 203 (emphasis original).

be offered in parallel to those of Murphy and McClendon, but theirs nonetheless provides a useful ‘grid’ with which to analyse Newbigin’s work.⁸⁶ In the light of this framework, therefore, we may now make some preliminary observations about Newbigin’s ‘positioning’ with respect to both ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ assumptions.

(i) *Epistemology and the quest for certainty*

In the terms of Murphy and McClendon’s definitions, Newbigin’s approach to the question of epistemology would have to be reckoned as at least radically *subversive* of the ‘modern’ paradigm. As we saw in the previous chapter, he repeatedly rejects the Enlightenment framework set out by Descartes that sought to provide a certain starting point for knowledge. On one occasion he even refers to ‘the new Cartesian starting point’ as ‘a small-scale repetition of the Fall’(!)⁸⁷ His indebtedness to Polanyi is nowhere more in evidence than in this subversion. From his first reference to the work of the Hungarian philosopher in *Honest Religion for Secular Man*,⁸⁸ Newbigin repeatedly eschews a Cartesian confidence in the possibility of epistemological ‘certainty’ on Enlightenment grounds, and argues instead that knowledge is always furthered in a ‘fiduciary’ and communitarian context. In an article explaining how he came to write *The Other Side of 1984* he acknowledges this debt to Polanyi in the following words:

⁸⁶ For more general analyses of the cultural transition between modernity and postmodernity and its implications for theological reflection, cf. Allen 1989: 1-19; Bosch 1995; Brueggemann 1993: 1-25; Grenz 1995; Griffin 1988; Groothuis 1999; Hille 2000; Lints 1993; Middleton and Walsh 1995b; Miller 1989; Mohler 1995; Oden 1995; Reader 1997; Stiver 1994 and 1995; Tilley 1995; Vanhoozer 1998b and Ward 1997.

⁸⁷ Newbigin 1991f: 27, adding that he hopes that this view is ‘not overdramatizing’!

⁸⁸ Newbigin 1966: 80ff..

‘He showed how all true knowledge has both a subjective and an objective pole, that faith – so far from being an inferior substitute for knowledge – is the precondition of all knowing.’⁸⁹

But does this therefore make Newbigin a ‘postmodern’ epistemologist? We shall explore this issue in more detail below, but here suggest that two trajectories on his thought are significant at this level. In the first place, his acceptance of the idea (in a manner akin to that of Quine) that ideas and facts are part and parcel of the traditions in which they are found is certainly an concession to postmodern assumptions about the theory of knowledge. This sets him inevitably outside the mainstream of Enlightenment thought and within a line of thinking that is potentially ‘perspectivist’ and ‘relativist’. That Newbigin seeks to defend himself against these potential accusations – as we have seen – does not negate the fact that in adopting the kind of terminology that Murphy and McClendon describe as ‘holist’ (i.e., that knowledge is locally embodied) Newbigin must be viewed as at least ‘moderately’ postmodern.

Accordingly, Douglas Groothuis comments, ‘Like postmodernists, Newbigin emphasizes the dominance of perspectives and interpretations over verifiable facts.’⁹⁰ Or, stating the ‘perspectivist’ case from a slightly different angle, Harold Netland argues that Newbigin makes ‘unnecessary concessions to fideism’.⁹¹ For, by ‘simply appealing to what is held to be the self-certifying nature of one’s own faith commitments as the proper criterion by which to evaluate other perspectives’, Newbigin’s approach ‘is inadequate for settling the

⁸⁹ Newbigin 1985c: 8.

⁹⁰ Groothuis 2000: 154.

⁹¹ Netland 1991: 178.

question of truth.’⁹² Both writers argue therefore that Newbigin departs decisively from what they see as ‘foundationalist’ epistemological premises.⁹³

It is clear from observations like these that Newbigin explicitly rejects the ‘modernist’ approach to epistemology, but it is also clear that he does not want to be considered fully ‘postmodern’ either: at least not in the radical sense of writers like Foucault who argue that ‘perspectivism’ is all there is. For despite his attachment to what might be described as a ‘perspectivist’ approach to the understanding of knowledge, he is equally clear at various points that such ‘perspectivism’ – though real – is not the ‘final’ reality. There *is* in the revelation of Scripture a revelation of the ‘true’ story that transcends individual viewpoints: that – as he puts it – ‘in Jesus the whole meaning of the story is disclosed’.⁹⁴ In the light of this, he continues: ‘. . . everything else, including all the axioms and presuppositions and models developed in all the cultures of humanity, are relativized . . .’⁹⁵ This distinction will not satisfy classical foundationalists, who will claim that Newbigin is not one of their number, but it nonetheless represents Newbigin’s own rebuttal of the radical relativist charges, and means that he cannot be considered as one of the more radical proponents of postmodern epistemology.

⁹² Netland 1991: 179.

⁹³ Comments like these (both from evangelical writers) may reflect the fact that much conservative evangelicalism (especially in the United States) is itself so embedded in an ‘Enlightenment’ methodology (characterised by a Cartesian commitment to propositional truth and to an evidentialist strategy of apologetics), that it is prone to be immediately suspicious of someone like Newbigin.

⁹⁴ Newbigin 1995c: 88.

⁹⁵ Newbigin 1995c: 88.

(ii) *Language and ‘truth’*

A similar conclusion must be drawn in relation to Newbigin’s understanding of ‘language’. There are two aspects to this judgement, both of which owe their inspiration to Polanyi.

On the one hand, Newbigin’s disavowal of the Enlightenment notion of ‘facts’ is developed in parallel to his very early view that to speak of God as an ‘external object’ is to misconstrue his personal nature. ‘Christian statements about God’ he wrote back in 1966 (after his first encounter with Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*) ‘are not comparable with the statements we make about objects in the world of things or of ideas, statements, that is to say, about objects which we can grasp, manipulate, and even attempt to control’.⁹⁶ As a result of this he says that: ‘The language in which a lover addresses his beloved, . . . is not the language of scientific observation.’⁹⁷ Statements like these immediately serve to distance Newbigin from a ‘formal’ agreement with the more scientific Enlightenment notions of ‘representation’. Personal relationships – the only proper context in which to speak of God – will not allow such an understanding. In this sense Newbigin clearly breaks away from the ‘modern’ axis.

Nonetheless, his indebtedness to Polanyi enables him to construe as properly *objective* the language of ‘religious’ knowledge that the Enlightenment project had effectively *subjectivised*. In his 1995 book *Proper Confidence*, for example, he states that though a supposed ‘certainty’ about faith is impossible, he had written the book to assure his readers about ‘the possibility of confident

⁹⁶ Newbigin 1966: 58-9.

⁹⁷ Newbigin 1966: 59.

knowledge of God'.⁹⁸ The defence of this confidence is characteristically developed in specific relation to Polanyi's conception of 'personal knowledge'.⁹⁹

However, it is easier to draw out Newbigin's inherent 'sympathies' with certain postmodern convictions than it is to identify him wholeheartedly with specific postmodern perspectives. For example, in rejecting the Enlightenment notion that the 'referentiality' of language can only be understood in relation to 'objects' or 'facts', Newbigin moves strictly outside the 'modern' paradigm. But unlike many postmoderns he still insists on the 'referentiality' of religious language nonetheless. To speak of God is not in his vocabulary merely the expression of a personal opinion.

The second aspect of Newbigin's material is that his more specific discussions of the nature of language are also developed along Polanyian lines. For example, he follows Polanyi in advocating not only that traditions are passed on via the medium of language,¹⁰⁰ but also that language is therefore to some extent 'constrained', or 'boundaried' by the tradition in which it is used. As examples of this latter dimension one could quote his statements that, 'the full sense of the word depends on the culture in which the language has been shaped';¹⁰¹ or 'We can only use them as part of a language which is shaped by the experience of a whole people.'¹⁰²

As with the previous aspect, therefore, it emerges that Newbigin's 'positioning' is difficult to categorise with clarity. On the one hand he adheres

⁹⁸ Newbigin 1995d: 39.

⁹⁹ Newbigin 1995d: 39f.. For similar discussions, cf. 1994d: 68-9; 1996c: 20ff..

¹⁰⁰ See further our earlier discussion of Newbigin on this issue in sections 2.2.1(i), 2.3.3 and 3.2.2.

¹⁰¹ Newbigin 1989f: 29-30.

¹⁰² Newbigin 1989f: 34. Cf. also Newbigin 1990s: 6; Newbigin 1991f: 46; Newbigin 1995d: 49-51.

to some extent to the Wittgensteinian view about the boundaried nature of language. On the other, he clearly does not consider these language boundaries to be ‘final’.¹⁰³ If he did, his calls to proclaim Christian truth to the world would be a contradiction in terms.

(iii) ‘Collectivism’ and the social location of truth

Newbigin’s approaches to the questions of ‘epistemology’ and ‘language’ cohere in further statements of his which fall broadly within the third ‘axis’, relating to the role of communities in the corporate development of understandings of ‘truth’ and ‘morality’.

We quoted earlier, for example, his statement that: ‘There is no exercise of human reason that is not socially embodied, rooted in a tradition that is carried by a language.’¹⁰⁴ Here he links together convictions about the social embodiment of knowledge, the ‘embeddedness’ of that knowledge in traditions that nurture it, and the understanding that ‘language’ is the ‘carrier’ which expresses this knowledge and passes it on from generation to generation. These ideas again find their roots in Michael Polanyi’s thinking – which Newbigin

¹⁰³ Though he is in some sympathy with Wittgenstein’s views at this point, Newbigin himself never refers to him specifically, deriving his convictions from Polanyi. For the connections between Polanyi and Wittgenstein, see Daly 1968.

¹⁰⁴ Newbigin 1992h: 187.

alludes to in his 1966 book, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*,¹⁰⁵ and picks up again in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Culture* at the end of the 1980s.¹⁰⁶

Newbigin is firmly committed therefore to the view that there is no such thing as a ‘view from nowhere’.¹⁰⁷ All expressions of ethics and morality have a ‘context’. There are no universal, abstract norms for human morality or behaviour that are not dependent upon the context of the communities within which they were developed and in which they gain coherence and meaning. From this perspective, Newbigin is firmly within the ‘postmodern’ axis described above by Murphy and McClendon – particularly in relation to his following of MacIntyre. It was Polanyi who undoubtedly opened him up to these insights, and it was MacIntyre who helps him to develop them. The question as to whether they help or hinder his *missionary* objectives will be discussed when we analyse MacIntyre’s influence below.¹⁰⁸

(iv) *Newbigin’s ‘self-positioning’*

In terms of Newbigin’s *self*-positioning with regard to postmodernity, we would argue therefore that his attitude towards it is one of ‘qualified’ acceptance. Its assumptions are never taken onboard uncritically by him. Statements such as,

¹⁰⁵ Newbigin 1966: 81 (in the context of a discussion that is expressly indebted to Polanyi): ‘One cannot even speak a sentence without accepting provisionally the framework of thought which this language expresses and which is itself the result of the particular history of the people who speak it.’ Cf. Polanyi 1958: 112: ‘In learning to speak, every child accepts a culture constructed on the premises of the traditional interpretation of the universe, rooted in the idiom of the group to which it was born, and every intellectual effort of the educated mind will be made within this frame of reference.’

¹⁰⁶ Newbigin 1989f: 53, or 82: ‘No reasoning is possible except by the use of language, and language expresses the way in which a particular body of human beings has learned to grasp and cope with the world.’ These ideas are also linked in Newbigin’s later interaction with Alasdair MacIntyre which we discuss below.

¹⁰⁷ A phrase popularised by the title to Thomas Nagel’s book (Nagel 1986).

¹⁰⁸ Section 3.4.1 (ii).

‘. . . at this point Christians are on the side of the post-modernists’,¹⁰⁹ ‘In this I am wholly with the post-modernists’,¹¹⁰ ‘Ironically the post-modernists could be our allies in protesting against the rationalist impasse’,¹¹¹ or ‘Since the article . . . represents a post-modernist perspective, there is no point in pursuing this particular issue’,¹¹² all clearly suggest that whilst he is willing to go along with some central postmodern postulates, he nonetheless distances himself from the logical implications and more radical conclusions of postmodernity at certain key points.

These ‘cut-off’ points can be illustrated by returning to the key debate about ‘radical pluralism’ discussed earlier. Here, although he concedes to the postmodern position about the cultural embodiment of knowledge, he is at the same time insistent that to accept this position is not to go the whole way with the more radical postmodernists.

This can be shown quite clearly, for example, in the article in which he replies to the critique made by Elaine Graham and Heather Walton of the *Gospel and Our Culture* movement.¹¹³ Here Newbigin clearly and specifically draws back from this more radical ‘postmodern’ position. Graham and Walton accuse him of narrowing the focus of the Enlightenment by describing its effects in purely epistemological terms. They argue instead that the revolution in knowledge that it brought about was driven by wider cultural factors (embodied by the Industrial Revolution as a whole) rather than simply by certain ‘esoteric’

¹⁰⁹ Newbigin 1991d: 3.

¹¹⁰ Newbigin 1992d: 2.

¹¹¹ Newbigin 1992k: 23.

¹¹² Newbigin 1992d: 3.

¹¹³ Newbigin 1992d, responding to Graham and Walton 1991. Cf. Reader 1993 for a response to both articles.

philosophical concerns about the nature of ‘truth’ and the status of ‘knowledge’. In other words, from their perspective, the Enlightenment was in more general terms ‘culturally’ – rather than simply ‘philosophically’ – driven.¹¹⁴ At one point in his reply, Newbigin significantly accuses Graham and Walton of getting ‘very near to suggesting’ not only that ‘all human rational discourse is socially and historically embodied’ (which he agrees with), but also that therefore ‘human reasoning is simply a product of social or economic forces’ (which he rejects).¹¹⁵ He continues:

When they say that the Enlightenment was not primarily an epistemological movement, but the work of social forces such as the industrial revolution, they come near to making dialogue pointless, since if truth-claims are sociologically determined then dialogue is pointless and the only reality is power.¹¹⁶

Newbigin’s point about the location of knowledge is significant precisely because it highlights the distinction that he draws between his acceptance of the fact that ‘all human rational discourse is socially and historically embodied’ (a postmodern position), but his rejection of the logical conclusion of this position: that ‘human reasoning is simply a product of social or economic forces’¹¹⁷ (a radical postmodern position).

For Newbigin therefore, whilst the ‘traditions of rationality’ may be seen as systems of thinking and acting that are dependent upon the particular cultures in which they operate, ‘rationality’ *as such* is a human faculty that transcends whatever cultural form it takes. This ‘rationality’ is integrally connected for

¹¹⁴ Graham and Walton 1991: 2-3. Though they do not specifically acknowledge this, their analysis is much indebted to Lyotard’s views on the revolution in the field of ‘knowledge’ in the wake of the transformations brought about by the phenomena of postindustrialism and postmodernism.

¹¹⁵ Newbigin 1992k: 2.

¹¹⁶ Newbigin 1992k: 2.

¹¹⁷ Newbigin 1992k: 2.

Newbigin with the human search for ‘truth’, and its employment is entirely proper when pursued responsibly. As he puts it in a 1992 paper, ‘There is no supracultural truth. But this does not mean that there is no such thing as truth. It does not mean that we abandon the claim to know the truth.’¹¹⁸ This view about the nature of things is seen as entirely compatible with an understanding and acceptance of cultural ‘pluralism’ *if* that pluralism is one in which such honest and responsible searching can take place. As he explains:

The acceptance of this fact of plurality must not be confused with acceptance of the ideology of pluralism if that means the abandonment of the human responsibility to seek and know the truth. There is a proper kind of pluralism which affirms the freedom of people to seek for truth without being coerced, although this freedom is empty unless it is combined with a sense of responsibility to a cultural tradition. But a pluralism which simply abandons the struggle to distinguish truth from falsehood can only lead to the kind of society to which we are sadly becoming accustomed in the ‘developed’ world – a society which loses any sense of meaning and therefore can find no higher goal than the multiplication of amusements.¹¹⁹

If Newbigin’s self-positioning in relation to postmodernity is therefore best described as one of ‘qualified’ acceptance, a second observation is that (as with his responses to ‘modernity’) they reveal Newbigin’s method as one which is consciously pursued as being *independent* of prevailing cultural trends. It is intriguing that someone who argues for the cultural embodiment of knowledge, can so easily disengage himself for the purposes of cultural critique(!). This highlights a tension between the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ poles of his cultural

¹¹⁸ Newbigin 1992f: 202.

¹¹⁹ Newbigin 1993f: 240. It remains a central tension in Newbigin’s thought as to quite what is understood by the idea of ‘rationality’ if this is to be distinguished from the kind of reasoning that Newbigin rejects as Enlightenment ‘rationalism’. For example, how is this ‘rationality’ to be employed by an individual without some element of judgement taking place between rival religious notions of ‘truth’ and ‘error’? On what basis such ‘judgements’ are to be made is not clear. Ultimately, they appear to force Newbigin into a ‘fideist’ position from which, on the basis of his arguments, it is difficult for him to escape. We shall explore this in greater depth in the following chapter.

approach to mission to which we will return. On the other hand, it is indicative of his approach as a whole that he so consciously attempts his critique from a basis that is ultimately thought to be independent of culture (i.e., that of the gospel). As a result, though the trajectory of his critique of postmodernity may differ from his response to modernity, one could argue that its fundamental method of approach does not.

This observation leads naturally to the need for an examination of the roots of the arguments which he deploys in a postmodern context, to which we now turn.

3.4 Newbigin and postmodernity: the roots of engagement

When one traces the origins of Newbigin's interaction with the 'postmodern' challenge, it becomes clear that his reasoning is not newly 'minted' as a result of an engagement with the challenges of postmodernity alone, but represents the development of arguments that he had previously deployed in the context of 'modernity'. We shall now set out to explore this derivation – particularly in relation to the 'social and historical embodiment' of knowledge – before returning to and concluding our assessment of Newbigin's contribution to a 'postmodern' missiology.

The fact that his willingness to accede – at least to some extent – to the 'postmodern' position about the cultural embodiment of knowledge can be shown to be nothing 'new' in Newbigin's thought. In his reply to Graham and Walton's critique of the *Gospel and Our Culture* movement, for example, we noted

Newbigin's insistence that his arguments at this level were not newly formulated, but rather had *always* represented his position. Here he writes:

I thought that I had always made it clear that I accept the big element of truth in this. It has been one of my main, too often repeated, affirmations that the idea of a disembodied rationality is an illusion; that all human rational discourse is socially and historically embodied. In this I am wholly with the post-modernists.¹²⁰

We will now proceed to examine the origin of this idea with special reference to the work of Peter Berger and Alasdair MacIntyre. This discussion relates to the ongoing development of the thesis at three levels.

At a first level, it expands our analysis in chapter 2 about Newbigin's fundamental indebtedness to Polanyi's thought. It shows how Polanyi's material about the role of the community in the acquisition and passing on of knowledge via language and tradition – which were already in place when Newbigin came to write *Honest Religion for Secular Man* in 1966 – are now broadened in scope. Newbigin incorporates from the field of the 'sociology of knowledge' Peter Berger's notion that it is the 'plausibility structures' operating within a culture that determine what is perceived to be 'true' *within* that culture. In addition, from his interaction with Alasdair MacIntyre, Newbigin expands the discussion of the way in which the 'rationalities' which are embodied within historical traditions can be said to contribute to the development of those traditions, as well as to interact with rationalities of rival traditions.

At a second level, closely connected with the first, our discussion

¹²⁰ Newbigin 1992d: 2. Even by the original publication of *The Open Secret* in 1978, his rejection of such neutral vantage point is referred to as a 'wearisome reiteration' (Newbigin 1978b: 190). In this context, cf. also, 1969: 71: 'there is no standpoint which is above all particular standpoints. A man can only see things from where he is' (also 32); and 1977b: 8: 'we have no standpoint which is above all standpoints.'

demonstrates that the contours of the theoretical stream into which both Berger and MacIntyre contribute insights had *already* been established by Newbigin's prior concession to vital elements in the Polanyi thesis. On purely historical grounds, Newbigin's formal interaction with Polanyi pre-dates his reading of either Berger or MacIntyre by nearly twenty years.¹²¹ But conceptually also, it is a Polanyian framework that provides the structure into which Newbigin incorporates the insights of both writers. In the case of MacIntyre, for example, Newbigin specifically acknowledges this when he explicitly grounds his discussion of MacIntyre's work in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Culture*¹²² in a previous discussion of Polanyi's view of the way in which the 'tradition of rationality' operates within the scientific community.¹²³ By doing so, he shows that what he learns from MacIntyre is in line with – and builds upon – a basic Polanyian structure that is already in place. Therefore, nothing in Newbigin's writings which is specifically derived from MacIntyre can be shown to take him in a direction not already suggested by Polanyi.

A similar case can also be made for the theoretical relationship between Polanyi and Berger in Newbigin's thought. This is seen especially in the way in which Newbigin uses Berger's concept of 'plausibility structures'. More will be said about this in the following chapter where we will suggest that Newbigin's prior reading of Polanyi has influenced his explicitly 'philosophical'

¹²¹ His first mention of Berger is in 1983b: 12; and of MacIntyre is in 1986b: 26, following Newbigin's reading of *After Virtue*.

¹²² Newbigin 1989f: 55-65.

¹²³ Newbigin 1989f: 43-48. Also 53, where, in the introduction to his specific interaction with MacIntyre, Newbigin links this discussion with Polanyian themes that had come earlier ('What was said in the previous chapter about the role of tradition in science helps us to recognize that all use of reasoning depends on and is embodied in a tradition').

interpretation of what for Berger was originally an essentially sociological term.¹²⁴

At a third level, our discussion of both Berger and MacIntyre contributes to the ongoing argument of the present chapter both by enabling us to examine the inherent strengths and weaknesses of their respective positions as Newbigin adopts and develops them, and also by helping to determine the extent to which Newbigin by his interaction with their respective arguments may be said to be anticipating and addressing the postmodern transition.

3.4.1 Berger and ‘plausibility structures’

It is clear from Newbigin’s publications that Peter Berger’s writings became familiar to him in the early 1980s. Berger is first quoted (twice) in 1983,¹²⁵ but by the publication of *Foolishness to the Greeks* in 1986, the study of his ‘sociology of knowledge’ had clearly made an impression on Newbigin. Here he argues, for example, that:

Contemporary exponents of the sociology of knowledge have made us familiar with the fact that our sense of what is real is, to a large extent, a function of the society in which we live. It is almost impossible for an individual to deny steadily the reality of things that society regards as real, or to affirm the reality of things that society regards as illusions. The plausibility structures that largely control our perception of what is the case are socially produced.¹²⁶

Newbigin adopts and uses Berger’s notion of ‘plausibility structures’, but actually claims to go a step further than Berger in his analysis and application of

¹²⁴ See below, section 4.2.2.

¹²⁵ Newbigin 1983b: 12, and 1983a: 12 (footnote 28).

¹²⁶ Newbigin 1986b: 54. For later references to this central insight of Berger (and to Newbigin’s adoption of it), see e.g., 1989f: 64; 1993a: 90; 1994d: 80; and 1996c, 51.

them. Berger, he argues, develops the notion that the plausibility of beliefs within Western culture has entirely broken down, and that as a result of this there is no ‘plausibility structure’ operating within contemporary Western culture. As a consequence, people are – by obligation – ‘choosers’ of what and what not to believe, and are inevitably pluralist in their assumptions about the nature of ‘reality’ as a result. His claim – argues Newbigin – is that as a result of this, they make such choices in a kind of ‘plausibility’ vacuum.¹²⁷ Newbigin for his part accepts the basic premise that in modern Western culture there has been a breakdown of plausibility, but in *Foolishness to the Greeks* he takes Berger’s analysis a stage further by applying it to Berger’s position itself. He writes accordingly:

My point here is simply this: while Berger correctly shows how the traditional plausibility structures are dissolved by contact with this modern worldview, and while he correctly reminds us that the prevalence and power of this world-view gives no ground for believing it to be true, he does not seem to allow for the fact that it is itself a plausibility structure and functions as such. It is not that there is no socially accepted plausibility structure and thus we make our own choices. This *is* the ruling plausibility structure, and we make our choices within its parameters.¹²⁸

As a consequence of this, Newbigin concludes that Berger’s own adoption of what he describes as an ‘inductive’ approach to the reaffirmation of religious belief in the wake of modernity is itself dictated by the reigning ‘plausibility structure’ that militates against the acceptance of any culturally-transcendent form of truth. ‘Berger’s inductive method of dealing with the phenomenon of

¹²⁷ See Newbigin 1986b: 10-20 for Newbigin’s analysis of Berger’s position – as set out in Berger 1980.

¹²⁸ Newbigin 1986b: 13-14 (emphasis original).

religion', he writes accordingly, 'is itself part of this plausibility structure.'¹²⁹ Or, writing the following year, he argues that within Western culture:

. . . the operative principle is pluralism, respect for the freedom of each person to choose the values that he or she will live by. Here, plainly, is the real plausibility structure which controls our culture and within which Berger himself operates, and which he takes for granted. His choice of the inductive method for dealing with religious truth-claims belongs to this plausibility structure.¹³⁰

Newbigin's interaction with Berger's work is complex, on the one hand accepting and adopting his insights into the nature of plausibility, whilst on the other, seeming to suggest that the rigorous adoption of Berger's method leads to an endless relativity. As a result, conclusions about Newbigin's own views are inevitably tied to questions about the extent to which he is following Berger at this point, and therefore the nature of the inter-relationship of ideas between the two needs to be explored in more detail. This work needs to be done, for example, before drawing the possible conclusion that Newbigin is 'reductionist' in his epistemology insofar as he is understood to be *following* Berger.

The first step in unravelling this relationship is to determine exactly what Berger himself means by his use of the concept of 'plausibility' in relationship to the idea of verification. Analysis of this is complex because Berger's relationship with his own work is itself complicated. Some argue that Berger's approach leads him inevitably to a reductionist position with regard to the possibility of 'truth'. Robert Wuthnow, for instance, argues that because Berger suggests that the 'reality' of religion must be explained in terms of the social conditions within which it arises, there remains an inevitable tendency in his writing towards an

¹²⁹ Newbigin 1986b: 14.

¹³⁰ Newbigin 1987a: 359. See also his comments in 1988b: 31; and his parallel deconstruction of the historical-critical method in 1995d: 84.

epistemological reductionism. He argues that those who reject Berger's 'functionalist' understanding of religion and who want to argue for a more 'substantivist' position (that religion is an autonomous cultural system 'shaped strictly by its own inner structure and meanings'), will 'inevitably charge that the idea of plausibility structures opens the door for a type of sociological reductionism which explains away the reality of religion by attributing it to social conditions.'¹³¹ He concludes that, 'There is some basis for this charge, given the fact that Berger seems to treat plausibility structures as somehow prior to, or more basic than, the religious beliefs they make plausible.'¹³²

Some of Berger's writing does indeed seem to suggest this. He states, for example, in his 1970 book *A Rumour of Angels*, that 'Sociology . . . raises the vertigo of relativity to its most furious pitch, posing a challenge to theological thought with unprecedented sharpness.'¹³³ Moreover, in *The Social Reality of Religion*, published at around the same time, he argues that:

. . . sociological theory must, by its own logic, view religion as a human projection, and by the same logic can have nothing to say about the possibility that this projection may refer to something other than the being of its projector.¹³⁴

This clearly sounds the kind of language that is in tune with postmodern assumptions about the social location of knowledge. By implication then, if one adopts the view that Newbigin is following Berger in his understanding of 'plausibility' (and therefore of verification), then Newbigin himself must logically be associated with the same conclusions. In relation, therefore, to his

¹³¹ Wuthnow 1986: 136.

¹³² Wuthnow 1986: 136. Cf. also Wuthnow 1992: 9-35 for a fuller analysis of Berger's work.

¹³³ Berger 1970: 47.

¹³⁴ Berger 1969: 180-1.

deployment of Berger's arguments in a *postmodern* context, this would place Newbigin firmly in the 'perspectivist' camp – making the assumption that truth has no reference or legitimation outside the 'plausibility structures' that enable inhabitants to perceive certain things to be 'true' for *them*.

However, Berger's *own* position needs to be carefully construed before conclusions may be drawn about his 'followers'. To state our own conclusions at the outset, we shall argue that Berger himself does not ultimately adopt a fully 'perspectivist' position and neither does Newbigin by following him. We shall construct the further argument that this presents *both* writers with problems in the area of legitimation, and that the resulting tensions in Newbigin's thought may ultimately be said to mirror those of Berger.

Firstly, as far as Berger himself is concerned, it is clear that the concept of 'plausibility structures' is meant to function as an 'analytical' rather than as an 'evaluative' tool. That is to say, as a 'sociologist of knowledge' he uses it to analyse social systems of thought and belief along with the processes by which they are held. But he does *not* use it as an evaluative tool which aims to draw conclusions about the ultimate truthfulness of the beliefs thus analysed. In discussing the limits of the sociological approach he states, for example, that:

The most important limit is that any question about the ultimate truth or error of the theological positions under consideration must be rigidly excluded from the analysis. When it comes to such questions of truth or error, the most that sociology can do is to make one aware of the sociohistorical relativity of one's own cognitive presuppositions . . .¹³⁵

A crucial distinction therefore is made by Berger between 'reality' understood as 'fact' or 'truth', and 'reality' understood as 'those things perceived

¹³⁵ Berger 1979: 223.

by the man in the street'. In his view, the investigation of the former is properly only the domain of the philosopher (or theologian), whilst the investigation of the latter is properly the domain of the sociologist. Berger's analysis of the social structures of belief *as a sociologist* is therefore distinct from any evaluation he (or others) might make with regard to whether or not they are ultimately 'true'.¹³⁶ Such judgements, he argues, would require a different disciplinary approach. Nevertheless, he insists that the sociological approach is a useful one on its own grounds, and that the 'dynamics' of the idea of 'plausibility structures' 'pertains irrespective of whether, by some outsider observer's criteria of validity, the notions thus made plausible are true or false.'¹³⁷ To argue, therefore, that Berger is 'reductionist' in the application of the idea of 'plausibility structures' is to misappropriate his own intentions as a 'sociologist of knowledge' and to apply criteria that he himself has already excluded.¹³⁸ On this basis, the concept of 'plausibility structures' was never intended to provide answers to questions about ultimate 'truthfulness'.

In seeking now to understand *Newbigin's* use of Berger's concept of 'plausibility structures', two points need to be explored. In the first place, his contention that Berger himself is operating within a powerful 'plausibility

¹³⁶ See Berger's crucial distinction between these terms in Berger and Luckmann 1967: 13f.. Cf. also his later statement that: 'sociology and theology are two distinct disciplines, with severely discrete relevance structures. Sociology has no choice but to bracket the ontological status of religious affirmations, all of which, insofar as they are properly religious, are beyond the range of empirical availability. Theology . . . makes no sense whatever *unless* these brackets are removed' (Berger and Kellner 1982: 90, emphasis original).

¹³⁷ Berger 1970: 52.

¹³⁸ Berger himself defends the position – described as 'dual citizenship' – which holds together in one person both a 'sociological' approach to the study of religion, and at the same time an active personal faith (e.g., Berger and Kellner 1982: 87 in the context of 85ff.). For a discussion of this 'dual-citizenship' approach, cf. Ahern 1999. For a defence of Berger against the charge of reductionism, cf. Guinness 2000: 34f., or Groothuis 2000: 101, who in assessing Berger's 'sociology of knowledge', states that: 'Many postmodernists take insights from this field of study and combine it with a worldview that renders truth impossible. However, this is not justified on the basis of the discipline itself. . . .'

structure' that he doesn't acknowledge highlights a tension within Berger's thought itself, and shows that Newbigin is aware of its implications. It is the tension between the 'localised' nature of plausibility and the possibility that this can be 'transcended' in some way. Berger himself appears both to be aware of this tension, yet remains unaffected by it in practice. On the one hand he makes it clear in *Rumour of Angels* that though the tendency within the discipline of the 'sociology of knowledge' is to end up relativizing everything in sight, he himself argues (in a chapter entitled 'Relativizing the Relativizers'¹³⁹) that the process by which this happens may *itself* be relativized. 'One (perhaps literally) redeeming feature of sociological perspective', he writes, 'is that relativizing analysis, in being pushed to its final consequence, bends back upon itself. The relativizers are relativized, the debunkers are debunked – indeed, relativization itself is somehow liquidated.'¹⁴⁰ Berger shows therefore that he is aware at one level of the relativizing nature of his own methodology, and of the potential weakness that accrues to his overall position.

But does this commitment erase the possibility for Berger of any 'supra-cultural' judgements in religious matters? Apparently not. Towards the end of *The Heretical Imperative*, he makes the retrospective comment that '... none of the foregoing was based on a Christian faith commitment'.¹⁴¹ But he continues by stating that: 'In conclusion, however, it may be appropriate to give up this, as it were, theoretical asceticism and to make some observations from an explicitly Christian standpoint.'¹⁴² The resulting 'standpoint' emerges as the conviction for

¹³⁹ Berger 1970: 43-65.

¹⁴⁰ Berger 1970: 59.

¹⁴¹ Berger 1980: 181.

¹⁴² Berger 1980: 181.

Berger that it is ‘the core contents of the Christian message’ that ‘provide the fullest and most adequate interpretation of one’s own experience of God, world, and self.’ He goes on to state that ‘Christian faith here means to express the conviction that the universe ultimately makes sense in the light of Sinai and Calvary.’¹⁴³

Here then is Berger’s ‘theological’ perspective set alongside the ‘sociological’. They are two different approaches to the question of epistemology. But the question remains as to whether his theoretical framework does not create an unresolved tension between them. For how is it possible to transcend the ‘relativized’ culture of which one is a part, in order to make the judgement that Christian faith is truer than – say – Muslim or Hindu faith? Berger’s answer in *The Heretical Imperative* is that this comparative analysis can only be done on the basis of a culturally-transcendent ‘rationality’, a process which he describes in the following words: ‘the only way of beginning to tell “true” from “false” religious experience is to weigh the insights purporting to come from the experience on the scale of reason.’¹⁴⁴ This, he insists, is not the ‘stance of Enlightenment rationalism with regard to religion’ for the ‘core of the religious phenomenon . . . is beyond all rationality.’ He continues:

But, inadequate as this may be for the deeply rooted human urge for ‘infallible credentials’ in this area, nothing better can be suggested than sober rational assessment in the matter of finding criteria for distinguishing ‘true’ religious experience from its flawed imitations.¹⁴⁵

With this in mind, there are two points to be made about Newbigin’s

¹⁴³ Berger 1980: 182.

¹⁴⁴ Berger 1980: 148.

¹⁴⁵ Berger 1980: 148. For a negative discussion of Berger’s position see e.g., Gaede 1986; for a more positive assessment, cf. Ahern 1999: esp. 91ff..

observation – referred to above – that Berger’s method needs to be applied to Berger himself. Firstly, it shows that he is aware of this central tension in Berger’s thought between the acceptance that ‘plausibility’ is localised (and that therefore everything can be relativized), and the argument that there is in existence a ‘transcending rationality’ that somehow operates above these constraints.

But, secondly, the crucial point of this whole discussion is that Newbigin is *not* so aware that his own methodology is open to the same critique as the one he applies to Berger. As a result, in parallel to Berger, his own use of the concept of ‘plausibility structures’ must be said ultimately to mirror Berger’s distinctions between ‘sociological’ and ‘theological’ approaches to ‘truth’. Like Berger, Newbigin wants to defend both the essentially ‘localised’ nature of plausibility, but at the same time he seeks to defend the notion that there is a ‘rationality’ that transcends this context. Like Berger, therefore, he distinguishes observations about the localised nature of knowledge from any attempt to argue either that all methods which enquire after ‘truth’ are thereby also relativized, or that the truthfulness of ‘beliefs’ thus sustained is also relative. For Newbigin also then, there is a vital sense in which human reasoning transcends the local situation.

But whereas Berger’s appeal at this point is to an ‘inductive’ approach to the possibility of religious faith (entailing what he describes as a rational ‘contestation’ between the different religions of the world¹⁴⁶), Newbigin’s appeal in this context is to the pre-eminence of the Biblical story over all others. In his 1992 article ‘Way Out West’, for example, he states accordingly that:

¹⁴⁶ For Berger’s discussion of this idea, cf. Berger 1980: 157-189.

Ironically the post-modernists could be our allies in protesting against the rationalist impasse. I say that it is an impasse because the rationalists insist that everything must be in the form of a timeless statement. But whenever they set themselves to formulate such a statement, it only becomes evident that such a statement is itself a product of the times. So where is the eternal? I see an alternative in the narrative, the gospel story. There is the story which conveys eternal truth. I think we must regain a proper appreciation for the truth that can be conveyed in story.¹⁴⁷

But the same tension applies here as it does to Berger's thesis. On the one hand there is commitment to the localised nature of both the exercise of human rationality, and also to the cultural embodiment of the structures and systems that make beliefs possible. On the other hand, there is the commitment to an idea of 'truth' – and its accessibility – that transcends this localised context. The key question remains for Newbigin (as it does for Berger): how is it possible to verify that the claim to know the kind of 'truth' which transcends cultural locality is not itself a manifestation of another form of 'localised' knowledge? The answer suggested by both writers boils down in the end to some form of 'rationality' exercised by responsible human beings. But the tension for both is that the exercise of this 'faculty' may itself be relativised. Where then does this leave religious faith?

(i) Conclusions

Newbigin's use of Berger's notion of 'plausibility' therefore is intriguing.

¹⁴⁷ Newbigin 1992k: 23. Cf. also 1992h: 187: 'There is no exercise of human reason that is not socially embodied, rooted in a tradition that is carried by a language. The gospel is not a statement of eternal truths in the style of mathematics; it is the story of what God has done. It is contested in the name of other stories. We have no suprahistorical standpoint from which we can demonstrate with any kind of infallibility that it, and not others, is the true story. Our role is more humble. We stand among all other human beings with their different stories to bear witness to what God has done. We do so because we have been laid hold of and commissioned to do so. Our telling of the story is an act of gratitude and faithfulness towards God.'

In relation to the questions of modernity, it enables him to ‘relativize’ the notion that there exists some independent and neutral standpoint from which to judge between the concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘error’. As we move into a postmodern environment, this approach now additionally enables him to undercut the potential challenge that the truth of the Christian message is being predicated on the basis of older Enlightenment notions about the supremacy and primacy of ‘reason’. Moreover, his defence that he is committed to a ‘story’ rather than to some ‘neutral’, ‘external’ standpoint, means that his position is already broadly ‘acceptable’ amongst postmoderns who emphasise the importance of ‘narrative’ traditions. This appears to be an ‘accident’ of method in the sense that Newbigin encounters the postmodern challenge with this argument already in place. Nonetheless, it is a strategy well-suited to the postmodern environment. He does not have to defend Christianity from an Enlightenment standpoint – however modified is its structure. Instead, within a ‘plurality of stories’, he is able to engage immediately at the level of his *own* commitment to a ‘(S)tory’.

Yet if this apologetic engagement is apposite in a postmodern context, the questions that have been raised concerning its theoretical underpinning remain pertinent. There are two dimensions to these questions. On the one hand, in appearing to argue at times for the existence of some form of supracultural ‘rationality’, it remains unclear without further elucidation how Newbigin really does escape from what he calls the ‘rationalist impasse’.¹⁴⁸ Is the basis upon which he defends the ‘truthfulness’ of the Christian story over *other* stories ultimately a neutral Enlightenment one? If not, how would its claims be

¹⁴⁸ Newbigin 1992k: 23.

accessible to outsiders? If on the other hand his methodology *does* escape from the ‘impasse’ – as he claims it does – will not the form of this escape inevitably make him a fideist? For if he is not standing on grounds that can be defended rationally, how can he counter the accusation that the grounds on which he *does* stand cannot be defended from the sceptical viewpoint of unbelievers?

3.4.2 MacIntyre and the cultural discourses of rationality

With these questions in mind we move now to a discussion of Newbigin’s interaction with the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. The significance of this for our discussion of Newbigin in the context of postmodernity is twofold.

Firstly, in view of our analysis of Berger’s work above, MacIntyre’s discussion of the nature of ‘traditions’, and his engagement with the related concepts of ‘rationality’, ‘translatability’ and ‘commensurability’ are of key importance to Newbigin, and may help to clarify some of the questions we raised in the previous section. Clearly, the question about whether the Church (as itself a ‘tradition of rationality’) is able to engage in dialogue with ‘competing rationalities’ is a critical one for Newbigin – particularly in the light of his agreement with MacIntyre that neutral Enlightenment viewpoints are to be rejected.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ For the agreement of the two on this point, see Newbigin 1989f: 82, where he refers in general terms to MacIntyre 1988. (‘... as Alasdair MacIntyre has shown. . . . it is an illusion to suppose that there is available to us some kind of pure rationality existing in a disembodied state and therefore capable of passing judgment on all the various ways of grasping truth developed in particular socially embodied traditions of rational discourse’). For MacIntyre’s own formulation (which Newbigin may have had in mind), cf. MacIntyre 1988: 367: ‘it is an illusion to suppose that there is some neutral standing ground, some locus for rationality as such, which can afford rational resources sufficient for enquiry independent of all traditions. Those who have maintained otherwise either have covertly been adopting the standpoint of a tradition and deceiving themselves and perhaps others into supposing that theirs was just such a neutral standing ground or else have simply been in error’.

Secondly, Murphy and McClendon have concluded that by departing from the ‘individualist’/‘collectivist’ axis of modernity – both in his development of what they call a ‘corporate metaphysics’, and also by his commitment to a ‘late-Wittgensteinian’ understanding of the function of language – MacIntyre shows himself in certain ways to be a characteristically ‘postmodern’ thinker.¹⁵⁰ The degree to which Newbigin agrees with him in these matters is therefore clearly significant in our ongoing analysis of the extent to which Newbigin may be said to be anticipating and addressing the postmodern situation.

MacIntyre’s 1981 book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*¹⁵¹ had been influential in buttressing Newbigin’s arguments from the mid-eighties about the distinction between ‘facts’ and ‘values’, and had helped him to show that a post-Enlightenment basis for ethics and morality could only be found in a tradition of morality that had already existed well *before* the Enlightenment.¹⁵² For the Enlightenment’s rationalist foundations could never sustain conceptions of morality for the simple reason that they could neither explain the move from ‘is’ to ‘ought’, nor could they articulate how the notion of ‘value’ could have any meaning outside of an older and more traditional framework of moral behaviour.

Newbigin had used these observations to reinforce his central Polanyian contention that the Enlightenment vision had now reached a point of terminal decay. But he also quotes with approval MacIntyre’s proposal that the way out of the crisis posed by the oncoming of what he calls the ‘new dark ages’ lies in the

¹⁵⁰ Murphy and McClendon 1989: 203-4.

¹⁵¹ MacIntyre 1981. Newbigin himself used the 1st edition of *After Virtue* and in those instances where I discuss his specific interaction with MacIntyre, I shall refer to this edition. Later I refer to the 2nd edition, where a concluding chapter has been added.

¹⁵² Newbigin 1986b: 36, referring to MacIntyre 1981: 35-59. See also the influence of MacIntyre in this context at: Newbigin 1986b: 26, 75-7; 1987a: 360-2; 1989g: 12; 1989f: 58f.; 1990s: 2-3; 1991c: 3; 1994a: 126; 1995d: 55-6.

sustaining of communities that are grounded in the ‘moral life’.¹⁵³ In the past, MacIntyre argues, the ‘barbarians’ of the dark ages were ‘at the door’ of society. But in the present era, however, they ‘are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time.’¹⁵⁴ Moreover, Newbigin records MacIntyre’s warning that, ‘it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament.’¹⁵⁵ In responding empathetically to this thesis, Newbigin asks:

If that is true, as I think it is, we must ask what the conditions are for the recovery by the church of its proper distinction from, and its proper responsibility for, this secular culture that we have shared so comfortably and so long with what MacIntyre would call the barbarians.¹⁵⁶

MacIntyre’s sequel to *After Virtue* (entitled *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*) was published in 1988 and had been read carefully by Newbigin prior to his Alexander Robertson Lectures in Glasgow in the same year. It was these lectures that were subsequently published as *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* in 1989.¹⁵⁷ Here Newbigin specifically engages with MacIntyre’s understanding of the ‘social’ and ‘tradition-based’ aspects of knowledge that are

¹⁵³ MacIntyre 1981: 244-5, quoted in Newbigin 1986b: 134. MacIntyre’s full sentence reads: ‘What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us’ (1981: 245).

¹⁵⁴ MacIntyre 1981: 245.

¹⁵⁵ MacIntyre 1981: 245. Newbigin misquotes MacIntyre slightly by omitting the words ‘part of’.

¹⁵⁶ Newbigin 1986b: 134. Though Newbigin occasionally states that MacIntyre is recalling the time of Augustine in these discussions (e.g., 1986b: 133, where he states that MacIntyre ‘invokes the memory of that moment to illuminate our situation’. Also: 1991f: 15, 18), MacIntyre does not actually refer to Augustine at this point (nor in the book as a whole in this context). Newbigin appears to be reading an Augustinian understanding into MacIntyre’s material via his reading of Polanyi who makes the similar point (cf. Polanyi 1958: 266-7). For Newbigin’s own view of the parallels between Augustine’s time and the present (referring directly to Polanyi), cf. 1983b: 23-5, 63; 1986b: 102-5; 1991f: 15ff.; 1995c: 26-9. We explore this in greater detail in the following chapter.

¹⁵⁷ For Newbigin’s acknowledgement of indebtedness to MacIntyre’s book cf. Newbigin 1989f: x, 55, 82. For further references to this, cf. 1989i: 50; 1990m: 142; and 1990n: 141.

so central to MacIntyre's understanding of what he calls 'competing rationalities'.¹⁵⁸

What is new following this reading is the development of a discussion about the *possibility* of dialogue between differing traditions. This is integrally connected to our preceding examination of Berger in the sense that once one has accepted the localised nature of knowledge, it becomes very difficult to envisage how any form of 'dialogue' can take place with *rival* 'traditions'. But whereas Berger is more interested in the differing perspectives that the separate disciplines of sociology and theology may be said to bring to an evaluation of truth claims, MacIntyre concentrates more exclusively on the possibility of dialogue. Newbigin's thesis in responding to Berger was to uphold the truth-bearing nature of 'stories', and in particular the ultimate truth-claim of the *Christian* 'story'. In his interaction with MacIntyre on the other hand, the point under discussion is the *mode* of rationality whereby dialogue between 'rival' traditions becomes possible. This is a crucial issue for Newbigin (no less than for MacIntyre) if their positions are not to slip back into relativism.

MacIntyre, for his part, develops the case that within the context of post-Enlightenment thought, two responses have been made to the question of how to judge between 'rival' rationalities. Firstly, 'relativists' have argued that any one tradition of rationality has as much right to claim our allegiance as any other, and therefore no one tradition can claim a pre-eminence.¹⁵⁹ Secondly, 'perspectivists' have argued that since the claim to truthfulness arises from within the context of *particular* systems of thought and rationality, no one system can claim to tell any

¹⁵⁸ MacIntyre 1988: 1ff.. In referring to MacIntyre's thesis I shall use Newbigin's phrase 'traditions of rationality' (see e.g., Newbigin 1989f: 55-56, 65; 1989i: 50).

¹⁵⁹ MacIntyre 1988: 352.

other system what is right and what is not right with regard to notions either of behaviour, or of moral justification.¹⁶⁰ Both positions, however, are – according to MacIntyre – ‘fundamentally misconceived and misdirected’.¹⁶¹ He writes accordingly that:

While the thinkers of the Enlightenment insisted upon a particular type of view of truth and rationality, one in which truth is guaranteed by rational method and rational method appeals to principles undeniable by any fully reflective rational person, the protagonists of post-Enlightenment relativism and perspectivism claim that if the Enlightenment conceptions of truth and rationality cannot be sustained, theirs is the only possible alternative.¹⁶²

Both these responses represent for MacIntyre what he calls the ‘inverted mirror image’ of Enlightenment thinking.¹⁶³ However, by responding in these ways, MacIntyre argues that what neither side is able to recognize is what he calls the ‘kind of rationality possessed by traditions.’¹⁶⁴ He therefore writes as follows:

What I have to do, then, is to provide an account of the rationality presupposed by and implicit in the practice of those enquiry-bearing traditions with whose history I have been concerned which will be adequate to meet the challenges posed by relativism and perspectivism.¹⁶⁵

If such an account of rationality cannot be found, then the question about transcending the limitations of tradition-bound concepts of rationality would remain unanswered, and the existing alternatives of relativism and/or perspectivism would have to prevail.

¹⁶⁰ MacIntyre 1988: 352.

¹⁶¹ MacIntyre 1988: 353.

¹⁶² MacIntyre 1988: 353.

¹⁶³ MacIntyre 1988: 353.

¹⁶⁴ MacIntyre 1988: 353.

¹⁶⁵ MacIntyre 1988: 354.

MacIntyre proceeds therefore to explore the basis upon which understanding between rival traditions *can* take place. It is commonly assumed, he argues, that where understanding exists between two traditions, 'it must be the case that they share standards of rational evaluation, such that the issues dividing them must in broad outline, if not in detail, be capable of being brought to resolution.'¹⁶⁶ This would amount to the existence of 'commensurability' between the two traditions.¹⁶⁷ But in reality, he argues, the situation is far more complex than this. For 'rationalities' are themselves embedded within existing structures of language and usage which are built upon tradition. By using these, each community sets itself to resolve those questions which are raised within the course of its own historical development.¹⁶⁸ Dialogue between different traditions cannot therefore begin until there is an appreciation that this sort of evolution and development is intra-systemically unique to those rationalities and makes understanding between them problematic.

At this point though, MacIntyre urges that instead of falling back into either the 'relativist' or the 'perspectivist' position, it is still possible for traditions to engage in a meaningful dialogue. Indeed, it is because of this possibility that both the 'relativist' and 'perspectivist' challenges can be circumvented: the 'relativist' precisely because such dialogue can be shown to be real; the 'perspectivist' because from within traditions coherent claims to 'truth'

¹⁶⁶ MacIntyre 1988: 370.

¹⁶⁷ MacIntyre 1988: 370. For shorter summary definitions of MacIntyre's terms 'commensurability' and 'translatability' see 1990: 4-5; for his earlier view, cf. 1977: esp. 463ff..

¹⁶⁸ MacIntyre 1988: 371-2: 'Every tradition is embodied in some particular set of utterances and actions and thereby in all the particularities of some specific language and culture. The invention, elaboration, and modification of the concepts through which both those who found and those who inherit a tradition understand it are inescapably concepts which have been framed in one language rather than another.'

can properly and rightly be made. As he puts it in a concluding statement to the book: ‘The rival claims to truth of contending traditions of enquiry depend for their vindication upon the adequacy and the explanatory power of the histories which the resources of each of those traditions in conflict enable their adherents to write.’¹⁶⁹

Newbigin’s main engagement with MacIntyre’s ideas occurs in an extended passage in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Culture*¹⁷⁰ in which, like MacIntyre, Newbigin’s concern is to respond to the challenge of relativism. He commences by saying that in this interaction, he follows MacIntyre’s thesis only ‘in part’.¹⁷¹ Newbigin doesn’t specifically elucidate the points at which he parts company with MacIntyre, but a study of what follows makes this more or less clear. What is significant is that in this engagement, Newbigin accompanies MacIntyre in thinking about the *mode* of rationality that makes dialogue possible. Note for example his language. A society’s ‘rationality’ he argues, ‘is part of and is embodied in the total life of a community. It responds to the new experiences which that community is having – whether these come from outside or from within.’¹⁷² As a result, he concludes: ‘The tradition of thought is not a disembodied ghost which has a life apart from the total life of the society which carries this tradition.’¹⁷³ The similarity of this language to the thought of MacIntyre had already been made possible by Newbigin’s concession to Polanyi’s thesis about the tradition-bearing functions of language and knowledge. It also has ‘perspectivist’ and ‘relativist’ overtones characteristic of many postmodern

¹⁶⁹ MacIntyre 1988: 403.

¹⁷⁰ Newbigin 1989f: 55ff. in the context of 52-65.

¹⁷¹ Newbigin 1989f: 55.

¹⁷² Newbigin 1989f: 54.

¹⁷³ Newbigin 1989f: 54.

writers. Newbigin is aware of the problems that may be associated with it when he states that:

If all rationality is the exercise of the reasoning powers of a particular community, responding to particular historical happenings and using a particular language; if there is no such thing as a supracultural rationality which can judge between rival forms of rational discourse, do we then have to surrender the quest for truth? Is there no truth which is true for all, but only 'truth-as-it-appears-to-us-in-our-culture'?¹⁷⁴

As a result of his engagement with MacIntyre, Newbigin's thesis takes the form of three lines of response to the charge of 'relativism'. The first of these, in agreement with MacIntyre, is his argument that every tradition is continually evolving in its understanding of the nature of truth. Sometimes such a process reaches a crisis point in which the older formulations are no longer adequate to meet the questions being raised. In this context, the tradition potentially faces an epistemological 'crisis'. Self-contradictions may begin to emerge as experiences are encountered which cannot be understood in terms of existing ways of thought. Newbigin continues:

At this point another, rival tradition of rationality appears on the scene – perhaps one that was always present but muted by the success of the reigning tradition, perhaps a new arrival. It confronts the reigning tradition with a radical challenge. It offers another way of seeing things, another vision of the shape of things and of the human story, a paradigm shift. Some, perhaps many, adherents of the old tradition find the new one more adequate to the realities they face, and are converted to the new view.¹⁷⁵

What happens at this juncture amounts to a resolution of the 'epistemological crisis' by the adoption of the other 'rival' tradition of rationality. What this shows, argues Newbigin, is that 'while all exercise of rationality is

¹⁷⁴ Newbigin 1989f: 55.

¹⁷⁵ Newbigin 1989f: 55.

within a social tradition, the tradition is not ultimate; it is subject to the test of adequacy to the realities which it seeks to grasp.¹⁷⁶ As a result, he argues, whilst it is the case that ‘truth’ can only be grasped from within a tradition, nonetheless ‘traditions can be and are judged adequate or inadequate in respect of their perceived capacity to lead their adherents into the truth.’¹⁷⁷ Here he is in broad agreement with MacIntyre,¹⁷⁸ and follows in the tradition of Thomas Kuhn with respect to ‘paradigm shifts’.¹⁷⁹

In a second line of response, again closely following MacIntyre, Newbigin argues that language is so crucial to the understanding of the development of traditions that adherents of one tradition can only seriously challenge those of another once the language of the rival system has been learnt and mastered. Only once a person has thoroughly mastered this second language (so that it becomes in MacIntyre’s phrase a ‘second first language’¹⁸⁰), can a real understanding be said to exist between them, and a comparison of rival conceptions of truth be undertaken. When this happens, writes Newbigin, ‘the two traditions of rationality are compared with one another in respect of their adequacy to the realities with which all human beings have to deal.’¹⁸¹ He continues that: ‘Although the two ways of reasoning are not mutually translatable except to a limited degree, that does not mean that they cannot be compared in

¹⁷⁶ Newbigin 1989f: 55. Note the Polanyian language both here and in the following quotations with regard to the category of ‘adequacy’ in connection with the verification of truth.

¹⁷⁷ Newbigin 1989f: 55.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. e.g., MacIntyre 1988: 361-4; also MacIntyre 1977.

¹⁷⁹ Kuhn 1970c, e.g.: 92, 112, 150. Resemblance with Polanyi’s discussions of ‘conversion’ are also apparent (cf. e.g., Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 180). See further our own discussion of Kuhn and Polanyi in chapter 4.

¹⁸⁰ MacIntyre 1988: 387.

¹⁸¹ Newbigin 1989f: 56.

respect of their adequacy to enable human beings to know and cope with reality.’¹⁸²

Familiar questions arise at this point. Is the comparative judgement about this ‘adequacy to cope’ *supracultural*, or does it function from within the parameters of an individual tradition? As before, Newbigin’s argument could signify that the ‘conversion’ is undergone on the basis of an analysis whose rationality lies *outside* the context of tradition, or it could signify that the rational and analytical process – though involving a real transfer of allegiance between traditions – is still carried out from *within* the rational constraints provided by one of the two traditions, and does not function outside of them. For the purposes of our wider analysis, one could label the first ‘modern’ and the second a ‘postmodern’ approach to the problem.

As a third line of response to the charge of relativism, Newbigin argues that since the relativist who claims that all rationality is ‘embodied in a social tradition’, is *himself* arguing from within a ‘tradition’, his own position constitutes a contradiction of the view about relativism being advocated. In Berger’s phrase, the ‘relativizers are relativised’.¹⁸³ That there is believed to be such a neutral position – argues Newbigin – is of course a hallmark of modernity. It is exhibited in the way in which the Enlightenment tradition itself tends to ‘assimilate’ and ‘incorporate’ other traditions into its own worldview – even when there is no real understanding of them. Here again he is following MacIntyre’s point that, ‘This belief in its ability to understand everything from

¹⁸² Newbigin 1989f: 56.

¹⁸³ Berger 1970: 59.

human culture and history, no matter how apparently alien, is itself one of the defining beliefs of the culture of modernity.’¹⁸⁴

Newbigin’s conclusion to these lines of response is as follows:

For a person who dwells in the contemporary cosmopolitan culture, shaped by the reigning dichotomy between ‘facts’ and ‘beliefs,’ it will be natural to relativize all the differing belief systems. And when, in this culture, ‘reason’ is set against the specific, historically shaped tradition of Christian belief, it is obvious that what is happening is that the ‘plausibility structure’ is performing its normal function. The Christian, on the other hand, will relativize the reigning plausibility structure in the light of the gospel. There is no disembodied ‘reason’ which can act as impartial umpire between the rival claims.¹⁸⁵

The ‘reasoning’ adopted here by the Christian is therefore not to be set against the ‘tradition’ out of which it has arisen. It does not exist independently. Rather, like other ‘traditions of rationality’ it is subject to the events and ideas within Christian history that have shaped it. So he writes that:

The reasoning which forms the texture of Christian theology arises out of the historical happenings which form the subject matter of the biblical record. It is the activity of a specific community among other human communities namely that community which continually seeks to understand and cope with all experience in the light of what was disclosed to those who were participants in or witnesses of these happenings.¹⁸⁶

In closing his discussion of MacIntyre’s work, Newbigin draws the conclusion that the key element in the successful confrontation with relativism is that the Christian learns both the language of contemporary society, and also the language of the Biblical tradition. When both languages are mastered, ‘one learns to live so fully within both traditions that the debate between them is

¹⁸⁴ MacIntyre 1988: 385.

¹⁸⁵ Newbigin 1989f: 57.

¹⁸⁶ Newbigin 1989f: 57-8.

internalized'.¹⁸⁷ The implications drawn by Newbigin from his application of MacIntyre's notion of 'language-inhabitation' are two-fold. The first is that:

As a Christian I seek so to live within the biblical tradition, using its language as my language, its models as the models through which I make sense of experience, its story as the clue to my story, *that I help to strengthen and carry forward this tradition of rationality.*¹⁸⁸

Like MacIntyre, Newbigin here draws the conclusion that the primary effect of this dialogue will be on the inhabited tradition itself – a point to which we shall shortly return. But Newbigin proceeds to the further conclusion that when the language of the Bible is 'internalized', and 'my own participation in the Christian tradition is healthy and vigorous, both in thought and in practice', and when the language of the rival tradition (embodied in this case by secular Western culture) is also 'internalized', then:

... I shall be equipped for the external dialogue with the other tradition. There is no external criterion above us both to which I and my opposite number can appeal for a decision. The immediate outcome is a matter of the *comparative vigor and integrity of the two traditions*; the ultimate outcome is at the end when the one who alone is judge sums up and gives the verdict.¹⁸⁹

(i) Conclusions

What then are we to make of Newbigin's interaction with MacIntyre? Firstly, there are two substantial similarities between them.

¹⁸⁷ Newbigin 1989f: 65.

¹⁸⁸ Newbigin 1989f: 65 (emphasis added).

¹⁸⁹ Newbigin 1989f: 65 (emphasis added).

Similarities

In the first place, it is clear that though he states at the outset that he is following MacIntyre's argument only 'in part',¹⁹⁰ it is nonetheless clear that the main contours of Newbigin's response to relativism in the light of his reading of MacIntyre are those of substantive agreement. Newbigin's conclusion (like that of MacIntyre) is that the answer to the relativist position is to be found in a return to a conviction that rationalities are *embodied within traditions*, and to an articulation of truth from *within* such traditions. His statement, therefore, that: 'there is no such thing as a supracultural rationality which can judge between rival forms of rational discourse'¹⁹¹ is finally 'resolved' by his articulation of a belief in its *intra*-cultural operation.

Secondly, in the light of this discussion, the questions also raised in respect of Berger remain unresolved. For having posed the question at the outset of his discussion of MacIntyre's work in the following terms: 'Is there no truth which is true for all, but only "truth-as-it-appears-to-us-in-our-culture"?'¹⁹² it is not clear that Newbigin has actually answered it other than intra-systemically. There remains therefore a real tension in Newbigin's thought at this point which never really resolves itself. One senses at times that he is wanting to say more than his presuppositional framework will allow. For example, when he says on the one hand that 'all exercise of rationality is within a social tradition,' but on the other that this 'tradition is not ultimate; it is subject to the test of adequacy to the realities which it seeks to grasp',¹⁹³ he appears to be going beyond

¹⁹⁰ Newbigin 1989f: 55.

¹⁹¹ Newbigin 1989f: 55.

¹⁹² Newbigin 1989f: 55.

¹⁹³ Newbigin 1989f: 55.

MacIntyre's formulation, and yet does not fully articulate the sense in which he means this. For how is 'adequacy' in this context to be judged if not by some 'exterior' warrant? If by this is meant the authority of the Bible, how is this to be perceived as an 'exterior' authority to one who doesn't believe? If on the other hand, it refers to an adequacy for practical living, how may one person's judgement of such adequacy be distinguished from another's (or one culture's from another's)? Are we not back in a relativist quagmire?

Furthermore, as a development of this second broad conclusion, we may state that the seriousness of Newbigin's final 'resting place' is more critical for him than it is for MacIntyre. Here we pick up Newbigin's reference to his 'partial' following of MacIntyre, and suggest that by it he refers to what might be described as their respective 'ultimate commitments'. There are three related dimensions to this. We shall explore these at this point before returning to a final, more general, conclusion about Newbigin's interaction with MacIntyre.

Differences

Firstly, and most obviously, Newbigin and MacIntyre may be said to have differing formal objectives. MacIntyre's project is an attempt to redefine morality in terms of what for him is the greatest tradition of all – that of Aristotle. He writes accordingly:

My own conclusion is very clear. It is that on the one hand we still, in spite of the efforts of three centuries of moral philosophy and one of sociology, lack any coherent rationally defensible statement of a liberal individualist point of view; and that, on the other hand, the Aristotelian tradition can be restated in a way

that restores intelligibility and rationality to our moral and social attitudes and commitments.¹⁹⁴

His aim therefore is to restore the ‘Aristotelian tradition’ as the best context for contemporary reflection about the primacy of what he calls ‘virtue’. He seeks to do this by showing that it is the most successful tradition in terms of its own endeavours.¹⁹⁵ At one level therefore his programme can be said to be an attempt to respond to the present relativism by a return to the past.¹⁹⁶ Newbigin on the other hand rejects the return to some ‘pre’-modernity as impossible, although he is aware that his own views might suggest that he thinks that it is.¹⁹⁷ Instead, what he advocates is a refusal to ‘accept the idea that there is no third possibility between some sort of theocracy, perhaps a return to an idealized picture of medieval Christendom, on the one hand, and agnostic pluralism on the other.’¹⁹⁸ What he urges is an appeal to the living tradition of Christianity, inaugurated in the past but still active in the present. Formally, therefore MacIntyre’s project is Aristotelian whereas Newbigin’s is specifically Christian.

A second difference in their ‘ultimate commitments’ is integrally related

¹⁹⁴ MacIntyre 1981: 241. Or (in the postscript to the Second Edition of *After Virtue*): ‘It scarcely needs repeating that it is the central thesis of *After Virtue* that the Aristotelian moral tradition is the best example we possess of a tradition whose adherents are rationally entitled to a high measure of confidence in its epistemological and moral resources’ MacIntyre 1985: 277.

¹⁹⁵ MacIntyre 1981: 111: ‘If a premodern view of morals and politics is to be vindicated against modernity, it will be in *something like* Aristotelian terms or not at all’ (emphasis original).

¹⁹⁶ This would appear to be supported, for example, by his statement (MacIntyre 1981: 111) that: ‘*either* one must follow through the aspirations and the collapse of the different versions of the Enlightenment project until there remains only the Nietzschean diagnosis and the Nietzschean problematic *or* one must hold that the Enlightenment project was not only mistaken, but should never have been commenced in the first place. There is no third alternative. . . .’ For the view that MacIntyre *is* advocating a return to pre-modernity, see Lyon 1994: 82-3.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. e.g., Newbigin 1983b: 63: ‘We can learn from the past but we can never return to it. We must exclude any kind of nostalgia for Christendom or for a pre-technological innocence.’ For similar statements, cf. Newbigin 1988g: 151; 1988c: 167, 170, 173; 1989a: 2; 1991f: 68, 84-5; 1992d: 3; 1995a: 3. For the roots of this argument see also 1966: 124ff.

¹⁹⁸ Newbigin 1991f: 59.

to the first. When Newbigin refers to debates in which ‘the two traditions of rationality are compared with one another in respect of their adequacy to the realities with which all human beings have to deal’,¹⁹⁹ it is clear that rather *different* realities are being envisaged by him than by MacIntyre. Whereas Newbigin’s ‘realities’ are eternal and spiritual, MacIntyre in the parallel context is more ‘modest’ in arguing that what the exercise of rationality is designed to promote is the quest for ‘the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is.’²⁰⁰

Whilst both writers appeal to tradition-based notions of rationality, therefore, Newbigin is much more ‘missionary-minded’ in his understanding of the Scriptural tradition than MacIntyre is of the Aristotelian. After all, for Newbigin the authority of the Scriptural tradition is construed as the framework within which all other traditions are necessarily relativised, whereas for MacIntyre the Aristotelian framework is much more modestly set forward. Although he himself favours this particular embodiment of rationality, it is the proper exercise of rationality itself that is more important to him, rather than the specific embodiment of Aristotle’s ethics in individual traditions. This becomes clear in the closing pages of MacIntyre’s book where he writes that:

There is a way of developing the argument of this book further which would be Aristotelian, but antagonistic to both Augustine and Hume; a way which would

¹⁹⁹ Newbigin 1989f: 56.

²⁰⁰ MacIntyre 1981: 204. There is evidence of movement on MacIntyre’s part from a more secularised viewpoint to a position more sympathetic to Christian faith. Cf. his early remarks in 1967 (e.g., 57: ‘The greatest contemporary moral achievement is the creation of the type of community where shared ends and needs make possible the growth of a common life and a common commitment, which *can* be expressed in a common language. But religious forms provide us with no guidance here’), with his later affirmations (e.g., of Jane Austen in the context of her Christian faith (1981: 170ff.), or his more general comments about the loss of virtue which has resulted from Christianity’s cultural demise (1981: 235-6)).

be Augustinian, necessitating a rejection of both Aristotle and Hume; a way which would be Thomist, synthesizing Aristotle and Augustine in a manner inimical to both Aristotelian anti-Augustinians and Augustinian anti-Aristotelians, let alone to Hume; . . .²⁰¹

As a result, there is a greater ‘openness’ in MacIntyre’s work towards a number of different possible outcomes to the project he initiates, than there is in Newbigin’s. Consequently, the idea that the Scriptural tradition reveals ultimate ‘truth’ is much more pronounced in Newbigin’s work than it is in the parallel notion that the exercise of Aristotelian ‘rationality’ reveals ‘truth’ in MacIntyre’s thinking.²⁰²

A third difference is that MacIntyre’s work is ultimately more concerned with the development of individual traditions from the viewpoint of their own *self*-understanding (albeit through dialogue with others) than it is with the possible ‘conversion’ of *other* viewpoints. In this sense, MacIntyre’s thesis has to do with the way in which individual traditions can be taken forward in their understanding of their *own* success in meeting the goals which – by the exercise of rationality – they set themselves. Dialogue with other ‘rival’ traditions is interpreted as a means whereby this development and progress by a particular tradition can be taken forward, but such development is viewed primarily in relation to the questioning tradition itself. In this sense we might call

²⁰¹ MacIntyre 1988: 401.

²⁰² The nearest MacIntyre gets to this understanding is in MacIntyre 1988: 363-4, where he argues that ‘To have passed through an epistemological crisis successfully enables the adherents of a tradition of enquiry to rewrite its history in a more insightful way.’ This provides a way of ‘identifying more accurately that structure of justification which underpins whatever claims to truth are made within it’. This ‘concept of truth,’ he goes on ‘is timeless. To claim that some thesis is true is not only to claim for all possible times and places that it cannot be shown to fail to correspond to reality in the sense of “correspond” elucidated earlier but also that the mind which expresses its thought in that thesis is in fact adequate to its object. The implications of this claim made in this way from within a tradition are precisely what enable us to show how the relativist challenge is misconceived.’

MacIntyre's understanding of dialogue as predominantly 'reflective' or 'reactive' in its aims. Its intention is that the tradition that originates the dialogue may *itself* make progress.

In this context – notwithstanding his discussions of 'epistemological crises' – his interest is not really in what Newbigin calls a *missionary* encounter: that is, of one tradition seeking to persuade another of the 'truth' enshrined within its own narrative. Even MacIntyre's discussion of 'crisis' in this context emerges as rather exceptional and unusual. Moreover, the discussion at these points is seen once more from the perspective of the 'self-understanding' of the tradition undergoing change, rather than from the perspective of the tradition deemed to be rationally superior.²⁰³ Newbigin on the other hand is much more interested in missionary dialogue. To be sure – as we saw in chapter 2 – the Christian tradition must be prepared to change in dialogue with other 'rival' traditions of belief. Nonetheless, his objective is much more openly 'proclamatory' and 'persuasive'. He believes that the gospel is *the* truth, rather than simply one truth amongst a number.

The vital problem for Newbigin in following MacIntyre therefore is that the problem of apologetic 'locality' is emphasised and highlighted. For all the protestations to the contrary there doesn't seem to be any way out of the potential dilemma arising out of the *particularity* of traditions, and Newbigin's agreement with MacIntyre serves to highlight this. Whichever way the case is constructed, the reliance upon the argument about the 'traditions of rationality' inevitably raises once more the question whether to speak of 'ultimate' realities from within

²⁰³ See e.g., MacIntyre 1988: 361-364, 387-8. Cf. also MacIntyre 1977: esp. 455.

such a localised tradition can ever be said to refer to anything more than a localised form of ‘truth’.

A final conclusion to be drawn from the foregoing analysis fits into the wider discussion of this chapter. It is that Newbigin’s concurrence with MacIntyre’s thesis serves to emphasize the fact that to the degree to which MacIntyre’s ideas about the social location of truth make him ‘postmodern’ in outlook, the same epithet must also be ascribed to Newbigin.²⁰⁴ That this position raises potential problems for him as a missionary apologist is a suggestion we have already begun to explore. But this depends upon the starting point from which the judgement is made. From a ‘classical’ foundationalist viewpoint, Newbigin is always going to be viewed as either a ‘relativist’ or a ‘perspectivist’. From a ‘post-foundationalist’ perspective, however, Newbigin’s tactic is disarming, and potentially powerful. The fact that he had come to this position before his specific engagement with ‘postmodernity’ is a measure of the seriousness with which his missionary strategy needs to be taken in a postmodern setting.

3.5 Conclusions

In concluding this discussion about Newbigin’s contribution in a postmodern context a number of points have emerged. Two in particular may be highlighted at this juncture.

²⁰⁴ See e.g., the ‘postmodern’ comments about MacIntyre in Hauerwas 1991: 13 and 106; Middleton and Walsh 1995b: 66f.; Milbank 1990b: 326; Murphy and McClendon 1989: 203; Stiver 1994: 98; and van den Toren 1993: 52f..

Firstly, we have seen that Newbigin's own views about postmodernity show that he understands it primarily in epistemological terms. This tends to highlight the fact that in responding to this challenge his own proposals about the 'universality' of Christian truth could be interpreted as those of a modernist 'having a go' at the 'postmoderns'. However, we have established that his credentials need a much more serious analysis than this. His prior concession to Polanyi's thinking at critical points had already made his outlook sympathetic to certain critical postmodern assumptions. Moreover we saw, for example, that in setting his thought against the paradigm set out by Murphy and McClendon, the central themes in Newbigin's thought position him strictly outside a 'modernist' framework. This includes his repeated rejection of the Enlightenment epistemological paradigm, his commitment to the 'localised' view of the way in which knowledge is formulated and passed on, and to the primary role of language in this development and transmission. Though we have seen that these elements do not themselves locate Newbigin in a postmodern framework, they do not allow an interpretation of him that sees him simply as a modernist attacking postmodernity.

Secondly, however, our analysis of his method has shown that it does not 'fit' easily within *either* a 'modern' *or* a 'postmodern' framework. This reflects Newbigin's own *modus operandi* which tends either to distance or attach itself to particular cultural assumptions in order to engage in a broader critique. There is an important sense therefore in which his method is culturally independent in respect to both 'modernity' and 'postmodernity', able to distance itself from *both* at certain key points. This is further emphasised by our conclusion that his methodology undergoes no significant changes in its methods and

presuppositions as it begins to engage postmodernity. His specific engagement with MacIntyre, for example, took place *before* he had begun specifically to address the question of ‘postmodernity’. On this basis, it is possible to take one of two positions. One can either argue that Newbigin interacts with postmodernity with the tools already in his armoury because he does not fully understand the novelty of its challenge. Or one can argue that he does understand the central questions posed by postmodernity and that his pre-existing Polanyian approach is consciously deployed to address them at certain crucial points. Our analysis fits better with the second option.

3.5.1 Newbigin: a ‘postmodern’ before postmodernity arrived?

One can argue on the basis of these conclusions that Newbigin’s programme is one that engages much more constructively with the postmodern context than many would allow. Indeed, our analysis of his engagement with MacIntyre in particular has shown that inasmuch as his missionary agenda is to be taken seriously, it has to be taken seriously in a ‘postmodern’ context at least as much as in a ‘modern’ one. This is primarily in our view because the *means* whereby he mounts his response to the postmodern challenge can be shown to have already adopted positions that make such a *response* both sustainable and engaging to postmodern thinking.

There are three aspects to this ‘sustainability’. The first is the fact that with most postmoderns he has already rejected the notion of an overarching ‘Enlightenment’ standpoint by which to judge between different standpoints. As he engages with the challenges of postmodernity, this enables him to undercut the challenge that Christian faith is ultimately in harness with certain powerful

Enlightenment notions about the supremacy and primacy of Reason. As we have shown, the fact that he doesn't have to defend Christianity from this standpoint (however 'modified' is its structure) means that his apologetic is able to begin its work much 'further down the line' than some 'modernist' approaches that are more concerned with establishing prior foundationalist criteria with which to judge competing truth claims.

Secondly, and closely allied to this, is his appeal to the gospel as a 'story' rather than as a set of 'doctrines' or as a propositional 'system'. As he repeatedly insists, 'the dogma, the thing given for our acceptance in faith, is not a set of timeless propositions: it is a story.'²⁰⁵ The older 'orthodoxy' (particularly amongst evangelicals) was often – and still is to a significant extent – to 'share the gospel' as a systematic framework of belief or as a set of doctrinal 'points' abstracted from the wider biblical narrative, rather than *as* the narrative or story itself.²⁰⁶ That this newer appeal to the gospel as 'story' has become the 'vogue' in positioning Christian faith in a postmodern context²⁰⁷ should not detract from the fact that Newbigin was doing it long before postmodernity came into focus as a cultural phenomenon.²⁰⁸ Newbigin's apologetic can therefore be said to have already taken onboard the power of 'narrative' to convey truth over against an

²⁰⁵ E.g., Newbigin 1989f: 12.

²⁰⁶ One thinks of 'tracts' like 'Bridge to Life' (The Navigators, 1985), or 'Knowing God Personally' (Campus Crusade, 1985).

²⁰⁷ See e.g., Clark 1993; Hauerwas 1991: 52; Lindbeck 1997: 432f.; Middleton and Walsh 1995b: 63-79; Sims 1995: 332ff.; Werpehowski 1986: 301. See also in a broader context, Carson 1996: 141-367, who commends the preaching of 'the Bible's plot-line' in the face of widespread biblical illiteracy (esp. 194).

²⁰⁸ For Newbigin's early understanding of evangelism as 'telling the story' cf. e.g., 1958: 22, or 1961: 90: 'There is and there can be no substitute for telling the good news. Evangelism, the activity of telling men in words of mouth or pen the story of Jesus, is a necessary and indispensable manifestation of the new reality in action.' More recently, cf. 1978b: 91ff. and the two brief articles (1990a and 1990l). Most recently, see 1999 as an example of his method in practice. See also his repeated emphasis on the gospel as being 'narrative' in structure (e.g., 1982c: 25-26; 1986b: 59; 1989f: 99-100; 1992a: 1; 1992c: 1; 1992k: 23; 1995c: 81; 1995d: 52-54).

older insistence, for example, upon notions of the referentiality of the biblical text to ‘ideas’ and ‘concepts’.²⁰⁹ Newbigin’s ‘narrative’ approach is similar in its central emphasis to that of Hans Frei in arguing, as Newbigin puts it, that ‘the Bible, taken as a whole, fitly renders God, who is not merely the correlate or referent of universal natural religious experience but is the author and sustainer of all things.’²¹⁰

In addition, we have also seen that part of Newbigin’s response to the postmodern challenge about ‘power’ is to insist that the biblical story itself revolves around a suffering and dying saviour. This enables him to hold together a commitment to the gospel story as ‘metanarrative’ as well as an emphasis upon ‘publishing’ it evangelistically, in the knowledge that the claims of the story itself undercut the postmodern challenge about ‘power’. Once more, Newbigin was doing this before other writers began to advocate the value and appropriateness of such strategies amongst postmoderns.²¹¹ Moreover, Newbigin’s pre-existing commitment to an understanding of evangelism as ‘telling the story’ had already placed him in a position that made this connection a natural progression, rather than a change of tactic.²¹²

Thirdly, as we explored in the last chapter, Newbigin’s Polanyian understanding of the Church – as an *indwelt* hermeneutic of the gospel – long

²⁰⁹ E.g., Groothuis 1999; or Henry 1987. (Cf. the discussion of Henry’s position in Clark 1993: 508ff.; McGrath 1996: 166-179 [esp. 170-73]; and Groothuis 2000: 116ff..)

²¹⁰ Newbigin 1986b: 59. He quotes Frei (Frei 1974) both here and at 1995d: 72. For a discussion of the influence of Frei in post-Enlightenment approaches to the Bible see Gunton 1985: 111-132; also, for a critical engagement cf. Watson 1994 (esp. 19-77), and Brueggemann 1993. For his influence on some forms of postmodern apologetics, cf. e.g., Clark 1993, and Sims 1995.

²¹¹ Cf. e.g., Middleton and Walsh 1995a.

²¹² Compare in this context, Middleton and Walsh’s change of strategy in favour of a more ‘narrative’ approach in their engagement with ‘postmodernity’ (Middleton and Walsh 1995b), as compared to their engagement with ‘modernity’ (Middleton and Walsh 1984).

predated the onset of postmodernity. As such it anticipated the current re-emphasis upon an 'integrated' understanding of congregational evangelism in which verbal witness and corporate holiness are held together. This integrated and vital connection between belief and demonstration has now become common amongst apologists seeking to engage with postmoderns - perhaps because their own traditions had managed effectively to divorce the two.²¹³ Again, Newbigin's own methodology is one that had already perceived this vital connection and had expressed its necessity not only as an apologetic expedient, but as a challenge – first and foremost – to the authenticity of the Church.

In these ways then, Newbigin can rightly be considered a 'postmodern' before postmodernity 'arrived'. Where he cannot be regarded as one, is in his view that agreement with the localised nature of knowledge does not preclude a more robust and universal notion of truth that is deemed ultimately to transcend the local context. Here Newbigin parts company with other contemporary writers like Lindbeck, Hauerwas or Milbank in insisting on the view that this 'universality' demands both evangelistic dialogue and proclamation. But whether this quest is legitimately grounded in a philosophical (or theological) context which escapes the charge of fideism is a question that Newbigin, in our analysis, never quite answers.

²¹³ For 'conservative' advocates of this integration as a necessity amongst postmoderns, cf. Hollinger 1995; Vanhoozer 1993: 27, and 1998b: 12-13. For a similar emphasis as a response to postmodernity from a more 'liberal' perspective see Hauerwas 1991: 152; or Lindbeck 1984: 36, who argues that the story 'gains power and meaning insofar as it is embodied in the total gestalt of community life and action'. (Cf. Lindbeck 1989b.)

Chapter Four

Towards a Critique of Newbigin's Mission Agenda

4.1 Introduction

The aim of the present chapter is to mount a critique of Newbigin's agenda from the point of view of the analysis undertaken in chapter 2 and developed in chapter 3.

In chapter 2 we established that Polanyi is the hermeneutical 'key' to Newbigin's missiology. Not only was he instrumental in providing the epistemological framework within which Newbigin articulates his own approach to religious knowing, but he also provided him with the cultural insights with which to theorise about the demise of the 'Enlightenment project' and to identify the need for a new epistemological 'starting point' for Western culture. Also in chapter 2, we established how Polanyi's 'post-critical' appraisal of the notion of 'personal knowledge' provided Newbigin with the conceptual tools with which to reconstruct a fresh epistemological and ecclesiological approach to contemporary missiology.

We built on this analysis in chapter 3 by exploring the effects of Newbigin's indebtedness to Polanyi in relation to an examination of his credentials as a 'postmodern' thinker. In this context, we pointed out that Newbigin's discussions of Peter Berger's 'plausibility structures' and Alasdair

MacIntyre's 'traditions of rationality' fitted into a structure of thought already supplied by Polanyi and helped as a result to contribute to the postmodern dimensions of Newbigin's thinking.

In the present chapter we will build once more on the analysis of chapter 2 in order to explore the wider ramifications of Polanyi's insights for Newbigin's missiology. Firstly, we will examine the effect that Polanyi's influence has upon Newbigin's 'cultural' critique. Secondly, we will scrutinize in more detail both the strengths and weaknesses of Polanyi's methodology in terms of its specific appropriateness for a missiologist like Newbigin. Thirdly, we will assess Polanyi's influence upon Newbigin's reconstruction of the task of apologetics, both in its individual and corporate (or 'public') contexts. This enquiry, whilst drawing its own independent conclusions, will also connect with the material in the previous chapter by expanding and elucidating the discussion about the aspects of 'tension' within Newbigin's thought which emerged there.

4.2 Newbigin, Polanyi and the 'epistemological' critique of culture

We begin with an investigation of the effects that Polanyi's influence has upon Newbigin's analysis of culture, and in order to understand this it will be necessary briefly to outline Newbigin's broader approach to cross-cultural mission.

The foundational framework for Newbigin's cross-cultural model of mission had originally been developed in the 1st edition of his missiological treatise, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology*, and in the article

‘Christ and the Cultures’, both of which were published in 1978.¹ It was developed in *The Open Secret* in terms of a ‘three-cornered relationship’. In one corner is what Newbigin calls the ‘traditional’ or ‘local’ culture (i.e., the ‘receptor’ culture to which the missionary goes). At a second corner is the inherited ‘culture’ of the missionaries (which Newbigin also describes as the ‘invading culture’), whilst at the third corner is the Bible.² For the sake of consistency in our discussion, we will label these corners as the ‘receptor’, the ‘missionary’, and the ‘revelation’ corners. The ensuing interplay between these various elements within the triangle results in what Newbigin describes as ‘a complex and unpredictable evolution both in the culture of the receptor community and in that of the missionary.’³

The description of this ‘triangular’ model of missionary engagement in *The Open Secret* was published some four years after Newbigin’s return from India, but it is understandably informed by his many years of experience there.⁴ The understanding of the ‘triangular’ model, however, undergoes a significant development in the 1980s which may be said increasingly to be reflected in his

¹ Newbigin 1978b and 1978a. *The Open Secret* was republished as Newbigin 1995c with a few minor changes.

² Whilst the identity of the corners is clear, Newbigin is not consistent in the terms he uses to define them. In one place he describes them as ‘the traditional culture, the “Christianity” of the missionary, and the Bible’ (1978b: 165), whereas elsewhere he refers to them as ‘the local culture, the invading culture, and the Bible’ (1978b: 166; and also 1978a: 4). For a helpful diagram that elucidates Newbigin’s material, see Hunsberger 1998a: 238.

³ Newbigin 1978b: 165.

⁴ E.g., in relation to the ‘cross-cultural’ importation of the gospel into an Indian setting and its impact upon that cultural setting (1978b: 20-21, 73-78, 96, 98-99, 170-171, 200 etc.). On the origin of the book, he comments in the ‘Preface’ that: ‘The original germ of what is here presented was embodied in a pamphlet . . . published at the time of the integration of the International Missionary Council with the World Council of Churches’ (1978b: vii-viii). The pamphlet referred to (Newbigin 1963) was entitled *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for To-day’s Mission*. It was republished in the States in 1964 with the title *Trinitarian Faith and To-day’s Mission* (the actual title referred to in Newbigin’s ‘Preface’). He continues: ‘The invitation to teach at the Selly Oak Colleges has provided me with a welcome opportunity to develop these thoughts’ (viii). Cf. also his comments about the book’s origin in 1993g: 229.

later missiology. This change occurs as a result of the way in which the ‘receptor’ and ‘missionary’ corners are now seen to be posing questions of one another that had not previously been faced.

Whereas beforehand, these two ‘corners’ had been perceived – in Newbigin’s own thinking as much as in the reflections of others – as being geographically *removed* from one another (with missionaries physically leaving one culture in order to go to another), now – on his return to Britain – he begins to perceive them as being ‘fused’ within the *same* geographical location: in this case that of Western culture. Western ‘missionaries’ were thus being challenged to reach the culture of which they themselves were a part. As he puts it, the ‘supremely critical dialogue’ which the Church must engage in is one with ‘the culture which took its shape at the Enlightenment and with which the European churches have lived in an illegitimate syncretism ever since.’⁵ It is the implication of this shift in perspective – already noted in our discussion of Newbigin’s conception of ‘dialogue’ in chapter 2 – which now increasingly begins to characterize Newbigin’s later thought.

In this context, it can be further argued that the reason for this ‘conflation’ is the introduction of Polanyi’s *epistemological* paradigm of ‘crisis’ and ‘opportunity’ which serves to provide the ‘umbrella’ framework under which the three corners are now understood to function. This ‘conflation’ is the new feature in Newbigin’s later missionary thought, and its constitutive elements can be expressed as follows. Firstly, the need for epistemological renewal emerges as the urgent need of the culture of the West (the ‘receptor’ corner). Secondly, the

⁵ Newbigin 1983b: 31, in the context of 28-32. Also, 1986b: 2-3.

recovery of a confidence in the authority of ‘revelational’ epistemology represents the most pressing need of the contemporary Church (the ‘missionary’ corner). Thirdly, biblical revelation represents for Newbigin the only source of a ‘true’ epistemology in its fullest sense (the ‘revelation’ corner). Thus all three ‘corners’ of Newbigin’s later missiological approach are redefined within an *epistemological* paradigm.

This reformulation of the triangular model of relationships within Polanyi’s epistemological framework of ‘crisis’ and ‘opportunity’ – though brilliant in its conception - nonetheless leads to three ‘tendencies’ in Newbigin’s missiology, each of which is problematic.

4.2.1 The ‘homogenising’ tendency

The first tendency of Newbigin’s reformulation is that it tends to conceptualise the three ‘elements’ at the corners of the triangle as ideally ‘homogenous’ entities. We will look in more detail at the effects of this tendency on Newbigin’s appraisal of secular culture (the ‘receptor’ corner) in the next two main sections, and so will confine our remarks in this section to its effects upon his approach to ecclesiology and biblical authority (the ‘missionary’ and ‘revelation’ corners).

With regard to ecclesiology, Newbigin’s ‘missionary’ conception of the Church can only ‘work’ as part of the solution to the epistemological crisis on the basis that it functions as an ‘homogenous’ tradition. In other words, it has to demonstrate and incarnate a *unified* conviction about the quest for religious truth if it is to be effective in modelling Newbigin’s new cultural ‘starting point’. The comparisons Newbigin repeatedly draws between this understanding of the

Church and Polanyi's image of the 'Republic of Science' tend to emphasise this idealistic conception, implying a commitment to united goals within a generally unified tradition. However, this ecclesiological 'idealism' emerges as a critical tension within Newbigin's programme, because such a renewal depends upon the Church's return to a 'revelational orthodoxy'.

Newbigin's repeated appeals to 'fundamentalists' at one end of the theological spectrum and to 'liberals' at the other amply demonstrate his awareness that the 'ecclesia' is in reality very *far* from manifesting such 'homogenous' unity with regard to the authority of revelation. It is for this reason that Newbigin devotes a good deal of space in his later writings attempting to chart a 'middle' course between the two. He critiques the 'liberals' for their accommodation to the cultural assumptions of modernity expressed in the 'historical-critical method' on the one hand, and the 'fundamentalists' for their desire for 'certainty' (which is but another aspect of the same cultural accommodation) on the other.⁶

But the resolution of the debates between the two views represent for Newbigin not simply a question of achieving some sort of *ecumenical* 'unity'. It is also a matter of missionary effectiveness. This is why he insisted so strongly at the first 'Gospel and Our Culture' conference in 1991 that: 'without a credible, intellectually coherent statement of the sense in which the Bible is authoritative for us it will be very difficult for us to challenge the assumptions of the culture in which we live.'⁷ There can be little doubt that Newbigin's lifelong commitment to the ecumenical cause is at this point put to its sternist challenge, for the

⁶ Note the emphasis Newbigin places upon this in e.g., 1988f: 192; 1988c: 164-5; 1988e: 104; 1989f: 24, 38; 1989h: 101; 1990s: 7-8; 1991f: 46, 49, 59, 66, 87; 1991c: 9.

⁷ Newbigin 1990s: 8.

prospects of achieving such an epistemological ‘synergy’ amongst Christians across the denominations remain far from optimistic.⁸

Newbigin’s analysis is also potentially problematic when viewed from the perspective of the ‘revelation’ corner of the missiological triangle. For here, the epistemological paradigm tends to ‘homogenise’ his conceptions about biblical authority as well. This is implicitly connected to the ‘idealistic’ understanding of the Church discussed above and represents – in effect – its mirror image. For Newbigin’s emphasis upon the narrative ‘tradition’ of the Bible as being the ‘pattern’ or ‘blueprint’ for Christian authenticity tends to suggest that it is *because* of its own broadly agreed authoritative structure that it is able in turn to *produce* in the Church the homogeneity of ecclesiological expression which he so strongly desires.

Newbigin’s use of Lindbeck’s notion of revelation as a ‘lens’ through which Christians are to view the world tends to underline this homogenous conception by implying that the Bible is interpreted in a monochrome and uniform way by Christians rather than in a manner which is both culturally and individually diverse. In this context, Terrence Tilley’s critique of Lindbeck could as well be applied to Newbigin, when he writes that the problem to be resolved is:

how participants in a religious tradition, such as Western Christianity, characterized diachronically by internal pluralism and instantiated synchronically in different social locations (where semiotic systems which they do not determine are the ‘native language’), can all be said to share a cultural

⁸ For Newbigin’s early ecumenical commitment, see e.g., 1953: esp. 87-100; also 1955. For his more recent affirmations of an ecumenical perspective, cf. 1976a; 1977g; 1980a; 1982a; 1984b; 1985b; 1985a; 1994c. (For his perspective on the ecumenical movement more generally, see the pair of articles in *The International Review of Mission* (1981a and 1981b). One is a reprint of a 1962 article, the other his later reflections upon developments since that time.) See also Wainwright 2000: 81-134 for an analysis of Newbigin as ‘Ecumenical Advocate’.

and linguistic framework *despite* the pluralism internal to the traditions and their widely varying social locations.⁹

Tilley concludes by stating that ‘Lindbeck’s view presumes a normality, a stability, of a religious framework, independent of its actual instantiations in multiple cultural contexts.’¹⁰ The same could be said of Newbigin’s approach.

We return in the *next* section to consider the effects of ‘homogeneity’ upon the third corner of the triangle (the ‘receptor’ corner) as it is more appropriate to the discussion of ‘faith’ at this later stage in the argument.

4.2.2 The ‘philosophical’ tendency

Having looked at the tendency of Newbigin’s material to ‘homogenise’ its conception of both the ‘missionary’ and ‘revelation’ corners of the missiological triangle, we proceed now to a discussion of a second more *general* ‘tendency’ that Polanyi’s influence has upon Newbigin’s thought. This is that it is prone to accentuate a *philosophical* approach both to the analysis of culture and also to the subsequent reconstruction of mission.

This can be seen, for example, by briefly revisiting the analysis of the previous chapter in which we discussed Newbigin’s use of Berger’s concept of ‘plausibility structures’. For whereas Berger understands and utilises the concept from within a ‘sociology of knowledge’ approach to the relationship between culture and religious faith, Newbigin re-deploys it on the supposition that it is essentially a philosophical term. This effectively leads to a reconstruction of Berger’s term.

⁹ Tilley 1989: 96 (emphasis original).

¹⁰ Tilley 1989: 96.

Berger himself developed the idea of ‘plausibility structures’ as a way of explicating particular aspects of the culture of modernity – not least its ability to sustain the ‘plausibility’ of religious faith. In this context, he writes in *Facing up to Modernity*, that ‘plausibility structures’ are to be interpreted as ‘infrastructures of confirmatory social interaction’.¹¹ He continues:

The social infrastructure of a particular ideational complex, along with various concomitant maintenance procedures, practical as well as theoretical, constitute its plausibility structure, that is, set the conditions within which the ideas in question have a chance of remaining plausible.¹²

‘Put simply,’ he says, ‘the plausibility structure is to be understood as a collection of people, procedures, and mental processes geared to the task of keeping a specific definition of reality going.’¹³

By emphasising the different ‘facets’ within this overall conception of ‘plausibility structures’, it is clear that Berger himself views the ‘intellectual’ dimension as but *one* component within a wider social and cultural infrastructure, in which both ‘overt’ and ‘subconscious’ elements play their part. Within this context, the philosophical perspective has its place to be sure, but the concept as a whole is in no way confined to an exclusively intellectual dimension. Newbigin on the other hand tends to interpret the concept of ‘plausibility structures’ in a *primarily* philosophical sense, understanding it to refer more narrowly to a ‘mindset’ or mental outlook which is dominated by an Enlightenment

¹¹ Berger 1979: 215.

¹² Berger 1979: 215.

¹³ Berger 1979: 216. For further definition, cf. Berger and Luckmann 1967: 174; Berger 1969: 45, 126ff.; Berger 1970: 50-52; Berger, Berger and Kellner 1974: 21, 75, 167; Berger 1980: 19; Berger and Kellner 1982: 63.

epistemology. It is exemplified, for example, by its relativising of notions of ‘truth’ and its distinction between ‘facts’ and ‘values’.¹⁴

Newbigin’s tendency to turn Berger’s term into a more exclusively ‘intellectual’ and ‘philosophical’ category is nicely illustrated by the way in which he ‘inverts’ Berger’s own position on the relativity of modern society which we discussed in the previous chapter. By his adoption of an ‘inductive’ approach to the relativity of contemporary culture, Newbigin argues that Berger’s approach ‘is itself a plausibility structure and functions as such.’¹⁵ He continues: ‘It is not that there is no socially accepted plausibility structure and thus we make our own choices. This *is* the ruling plausibility structure, and we make our choices within its parameters.’¹⁶

Moreover, it is in the very operation of this kind of specifically *philosophical* analysis that the Enlightenment’s ‘plausibility structure’ is said later by Newbigin to be ‘performing its normal function.’¹⁷ The resulting ‘slant’ to Berger’s term is summed up in Newbigin’s use of phrases like, ‘the plausibility structure of the modern scientific world-view’,¹⁸ or ‘The modern scientific world-view functions as a plausibility structure.’¹⁹ Newbigin underlines this understanding when in a 1988 interview he was asked to define what he meant by the term. He replied: ‘I think it is the belief that the scientific method – which has been so enormously fruitful for human life – is the only reliable way of understanding the total human situation.’²⁰

¹⁴ E.g., Newbigin 1986b: 14, 17; 1987a: 359, 361; 1989f: 17; 1990c: 337.

¹⁵ Newbigin 1986b: 14.

¹⁶ Newbigin 1986b: 14 (emphasis original), in the context of 10-17.

¹⁷ Newbigin 1989f: 57.

¹⁸ Newbigin 1986b: 15.

¹⁹ Newbigin 1986b: 54.

²⁰ Newbigin 1988b: 32.

As we have shown, Newbigin's philosophical 'leaning' is given a functional and theoretic underpinning by his reading of Michael Polanyi. That this reading should now inform his discussions of Berger is not therefore entirely surprising. Nor is it surprising that the effect of this philosophical emphasis is further to accentuate the epistemological bias to Newbigin's work on cultural transition, rather than to lead him to analyse other aspects of cultural change. This in turn implies three things about the concept of 'culture'.

To begin with, it suggests that philosophers and thinkers are more significant in moulding cultural change than other social 'indicators' or cultural 'carriers'. It is an approach which will always tend to accentuate what Andrew Walker describes as the 'trickle down' model of cultural transition in which the mass of society is influenced first and foremost by 'the cultural elites at the top' who 'dominate and determine cultural values, which in turn sprinkle down, spraying like water from a shower head on the classes below'.²¹ Whilst this may have been a fair conclusion to draw in the era of 'classical modernity', Walker argues that it is no longer true. Instead, he comments that:

... in late modernity, with the plethora of interest groups, cultural heterogeneity, and the deregulated mass media, cultural transmission needs to be understood in terms of the seepage from below, sprinkling from above, and jets from the side. We need a model that is more like a jacuzzi than a shower.²²

But in addition, Newbigin's 'epistemological' bias also implies that most people respond to cultural questions in a philosophical and intellectualised way rather than by means of a wide range of concomitant reactions (including emotions, intuitions, prejudices, social conditionings and so forth). Whilst the

²¹ Walker 1996: 155.

²² Walker 1996: 157.

intellectual approach may reflect Newbigin's own highly-developed critical faculties, most commentators would argue that this is exceptional rather than normative.²³ To this extent, Newbigin is susceptible to the 'elitist' critique, that though the 'epistemological' element is certainly one part of the missiological equation, it is not the only one. His reading of Berger not only slants the discussion in this direction, but prevents him from a consideration of other factors which might have resulted from a more detailed and wide-ranging interaction with the work of Berger, or of other sociologists of religion.²⁴

Finally, therefore, our analysis of the 'philosophical' tendency is inherently connected to the preceding discussion of 'homogeneity' in Newbigin's thought. For by presenting a somewhat monochrome tendency of Western culture to 'philosophize' about questions of plausibility, Newbigin suggests that his approach to 'culture' – as well as 'Church' and 'revelation' – is also being viewed in homogenous rather than pluralistic terms.

4.2.3 The 'faith-orientation' tendency

The third general effect of Polanyi's influence upon Newbigin's critique of culture, is that it undergirds his discussions of the dialogue between 'Church' and 'culture' with the assumption that overt 'faith commitments' are being exercised on *both* sides. Here our discussion reconnects with the earlier analysis of Newbigin's triangular model and investigates the specific effect that Polanyi's epistemological emphasis has upon the 'receptor culture' corner of the triangle.

²³ Note Berger's contrast between the 'few intellectuals and other marginal individuals' on the one hand and the 'broad masses of entire societies' on the other (Berger 1969: 125).

²⁴ One thinks, for example, of the work of Os Guinness (e.g., 1981), Andrew Walker (1996), or James Hunter (1983 and 1987) who all lean more heavily on Berger's insights.

Once again we may illustrate this effect with reference to Newbigin's use of Berger's 'plausibility structures'. For the result of Newbigin's employment of this term is not only that it becomes more philosophically axiomatic and formalised (in contrast to the influence on its conception of the more informal and subconscious 'social infrastructures' which Berger originally had in mind), but also that it now comes to express the dimension of a culture's 'faith-commitments' on the basis of which it holds its beliefs to be plausible.

This connection is derived from Newbigin's incorporation of Polanyi's idea about 'fiduciary' frameworks, and is applied to the competing 'plausibility structures' represented within Western culture itself – the rationalist thought-world of the Enlightenment on the one hand ('the reigning plausibility structure'), and the competing framework of the Church's belief (the 'alternative plausibility structure') on the other.²⁵ That both groups represent conflicting ideologies is immediately apparent throughout Newbigin's discussions. But it also becomes clear that *both* positions are understood to reflect the 'faith' foundations on which they are built.

In relation to the Church we saw in chapter 2 that Newbigin makes specific use of Polanyi's concept of 'indwelling' to link the ideas of 'faith commitments' and 'plausibility structures'. He uses this to articulate the idea that the Church is called to 'indwell' the framework of beliefs inherent within the Bible's narrative. This 'indwelling', he argues, represents the 'alternative plausibility structure' to that of contemporary culture – an alternative from which

²⁵ For the former, e.g., Newbigin 1989f: 8, 10, 53, 95, 97; 1991f: 28; 1995d: 101. For the latter, e.g., 1989f: 228.

the ‘reigning plausibility structure’ of contemporary society can alone be challenged.²⁶

But from an analysis of the way in which these ‘structures’ of thought are understood by Newbigin to relate to one another, it becomes apparent that he envisages the conversation between them as a dialogue between *competing* ‘faith’ commitments. As he puts it: ‘. . . what people fail to see, of course . . . is that *every* plausibility structure rests upon faith commitments’.²⁷ We began to explore Newbigin’s development of this idea in chapter 2 in relation to Polanyi’s conception of ‘heuristic passion’. It emerges from this that Newbigin has a developed notion of the way in which this ‘faith’ component is understood to express itself culturally. So far as the Church is concerned, of course, the understanding that a ‘faith commitment’ is intrinsic to its ‘indwelling’ of the Bible’s story is both natural and understandable. It is after all the ‘community of faith’. But as far as the secular culture of the West is concerned, to what extent is an expression of its own ‘faith’ (in the ‘reigning plausibility structure’) to *any* degree the corollary?

The origins of this approach, we suggest, lie in Newbigin’s transfer of the assumptions he makes in relation to his understanding of inter-*religious* dialogue (to which his time in India had made him accustomed) to the Church-*culture* dialogue in post-Enlightenment West. In India his apologetic strategies were wont to be concerned with groups of people who explicitly expressed religious belief – Christians on the one hand, and (predominantly) Hindus on the other. In the ensuing dialogue, a starting point of overt ‘faith’ could be assumed on both

²⁶ E.g., Newbigin 1989f: 98-100, leading to 228.

²⁷ Newbigin 1988b: 31 (emphasis added).

sides – with all that this entailed in terms of the presuppositions involved. On his return to England, however, a ‘transfer’ of faith-commitments appears to take place in Newbigin’s thinking.

In this process, an ‘equivalent’ to the faith-commitment undergirding Hindu culture is now understood to undergird the philosophical outlook of Western culture as a whole. The kind of vocabulary he uses is significant, particularly in passages where he speaks of his rejection of the ‘secularisation’ thesis he had himself adopted in the 1960s. We noted in the ‘Introduction’ to the thesis his use of the word ‘pagan’ (rather than ‘secular’) to sum up the implications of his new approach to the ideological presuppositions undergirding Western culture. He wrote in 1993, for example, that: ‘Like others I had been accustomed . . . to speak of England as a secular society’. But he continues:

I have now come to realize that I was the easy victim of an illusion from which my reading of the Gospels should have saved me. No room remains empty for long. If God is driven out, the gods come trooping in. England is a *pagan* society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very *tough form of paganism* is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church.²⁸

Statements like these appear to assume what amounts to an explicit commitment of ‘faith’ on the part of non-believing society in the whole way of

²⁸ Newbigin 1993g: 235-6 (emphasis added). Cf. also 1988b: 31, where Newbigin comments in an interview that on returning to England, ‘. . . it didn’t take long to discover that we are really not in a secular society but in a pagan society - not a society which has no gods, but a society which has false gods. I came to feel that more and more.’ It was by the mid-seventies that Newbigin had become aware of his own misplaced confidence in the idea that the global secularisation of the 1960s represented the ‘key’ moment that would bring human societies to face God in a new and critical moment of decision. For this original optimism, see esp. 1966: 27-30, 36-7, 76 (where he follows the insights of van Leeuwen 1964). Here he had written: ‘My question is whether the truly secular spirit can be *sustained* if it loses contact with that . . . reality transcending every human tradition and every earthly society, a God who is for man against all the powers’ (37, emphasis added). For further examples of his later more realistic response to the ‘secularisation’ thesis, cf. 1974a: 15-16, 19; 1981a: 248-9; 1990d: 149; 1993f: 230-1.

thinking that undergirds its life. But the degree to which such faith is either ‘overt’ or ‘explicit’ is highly questionable. It is certainly not equivalent to Christian ‘faith’, and even though it may exist in some intellectual pockets of society it is certainly neither uniform nor universal. From a Christian point of view the perception that the secular culture of the West is based to some extent upon such ‘fiduciary’ foundations may be helpful in terms of the Christian’s approach to unbelievers. But Newbigin’s conception of ‘dialogue’ – as we saw in chapter 2 – involves the consciousness on both sides that such fiduciary commitments are being brought out into the open for discussion.

His articulation of the ‘dialogue’ involved between competing ‘faith-commitments’ therefore involves the open statement of the presuppositional belief structures upon which the convictions of either side are put forward. If his experience in India predisposed him to an understanding of evangelism which had this sort of ‘dialogue’ at its heart (i.e., that between two *overt* faith positions), it is not altogether clear to what extent this is a useful approach to the question of dialogue with the deeply ingrained *unbelief* of contemporary Western culture. We return to this theme in the following sections.

As a final comment on these observations, it should also be noted that in relation to our ongoing discussion of Newbigin’s use of Berger’s conception of ‘plausibility structures’, the present analysis suggests a further ‘stretching’ of Berger’s idea at a theoretical level. For whereas Berger originally used the term to refer to the conditions which contribute to the initial *possibility* of belief.

Newbigin uses it by contrast to refer to the structure of belief *itself* (as inhabited by the Church or by Western culture).²⁹ The supporting ‘substructure’ of belief (as envisaged by Berger) therefore becomes the belief structure itself in Newbigin’s writing. Berger himself could not have made this move – not least because he was ultimately rather pessimistic about the churches’ collective ability to sustain (or even to contribute to) the structure of plausibility needed for the survival of faith. He writes accordingly, that: ‘By the very nature of their social character as voluntary associations “located” primarily in the private sphere, . . . churches can only augment the strength and durability of the required plausibility structures to a limited extent.’³⁰

This further reinforces the view that Newbigin’s interpretation of ‘plausibility structures’ needs to be distinguished from Berger’s if it is to rightly understood. For inasmuch as Newbigin’s appropriation of it in relation to the Church can be said to carry a ‘sociological’ dimension, this is better understood as deriving from Polanyi’s approach to ‘fiduciary’ frameworks than it is to Berger’s original conception of them as ‘infrastructures of confirmatory social interaction’.³¹ This conclusion would tie in with our previous observations about Newbigin’s work with regard to the influence of Berger and Polanyi: that his deployment of Berger’s ideas is better interpreted in Polanyian terms than *vice versa*.

²⁹ See the discussion in Williams 1993: 18-19. For a more favourable interpretation, cf. Ramachandra 1996: 153-167.

³⁰ Berger 1969: 133-4; also, Berger, Berger and Kellner 1974: 167f..

³¹ Berger 1979: 215.

4.3 Newbigin, Polanyi and ‘missionary’ theology

We turn now to an analysis of the impact of Polanyi’s thought on Newbigin from the point of view of Polanyi’s methodological assumptions. This approach to the critique of Newbigin’s writing accepts his appropriation of the Polanyi thesis on its own philosophical and epistemological terms, and seeks to explore the extent to which it contributes to Newbigin’s proposals about mission.

The thesis has already supported the view that Polanyi’s writings provide constructive material for Newbigin’s approach. For example, we have seen that his deconstruction of the Enlightenment notion of ‘objectivity’ – by pointing out the inescapably ‘fiduciary’ element in the process of all knowing – provides an effective and powerful argument against the purely Cartesian approach to knowing that Newbigin sets out to counter. Polanyi’s approach reconstructs such knowledge in more personalist and subjective terms, and thereby undercuts the central rationalist contention that only scientific knowledge can be accepted as properly ‘objective’. Moreover, we have seen that Polanyi’s reaffirmation of the ‘subjectivity’ of scientific enquiry potentially helps Newbigin to undercut the Enlightenment case – mounted on Cartesian foundations – against the supposed subjectivity of Christian faith.

Polanyi’s intention, however, is never specifically to apply this insight to the notion of *religious* knowing, although he is nonetheless conscious of the wider benefits – not least to religious belief – that will accrue should the Enlightenment emphasis upon a narrow ‘scientism’³² be reconstructed along the lines he suggests. In this context, he is confident that once the Enlightenment

³² Polanyi’s word (Polanyi 1967: 196).

shackles of a dominant Cartesian epistemology have been removed (along with what he calls its ‘absurd vision of the universe’³³), there will once more ‘open up instead a meaningful world which could resound to religion.’³⁴ Within the context of such a reconstruction, Polanyi is able therefore to defend the notion of religious knowing as a form of knowledge which – by its deployment of ‘personal participation and imagination’ – has as much integrity in its creation of ‘meaning’ and its relationship to ‘reality’ as that of scientific knowledge.³⁵

In these respects, therefore, Polanyi’s insights serve constructively to fuel Newbigin’s basic line of argument about the crisis facing Western culture. In the context of the defence of the notion of religious faith in a post-Enlightenment world, this is a bold and creative move with real potential. After all, a purely Cartesian epistemology had always struggled to accommodate the possibility of religious faith (and could certainly never validate it). As a result, within the resulting polarity that was established between ‘faith’ (viewed solely as personal preference) and ‘reason’ (viewed as the only foundation for objective judgements), the defence of Christian claims has always had to wrestle one way or another with the central dilemma that this distinction had established.

In the debates that have emerged, a central question has been whether the Church should take sides with the dominant cultural trend and seek to make Christianity ‘believable’ within the rationalist mindset of post-Enlightenment West, or whether it should stress the ‘revealed’ nature of the message and

³³ Polanyi 1966: 92.

³⁴ Polanyi 1966: 92.

³⁵ E.g., Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 65: ‘If . . . personal participation and imagination are *essentially* involved in science as well as in the humanities, meanings created in the sciences stand in no more favored relation to reality than do meanings created in the arts, in moral judgments, and in religion’ (emphasis original).

therefore reject any ‘common’ ground that culture might have provided. It was Basil Mitchell who wrote the following words about the apologist’s dilemma in coming to terms with these ‘rival’ claims:

We may picture the modern theologian’s predicament as that of navigating a river. The pilot is endeavouring to steer his vessel successfully down to the open sea while keeping his cargo of traditional Christian doctrine so far as possible intact; at the same time avoiding the shoals which infest the channel. Shall he make for the right, rationalist, bank of the stream and adopt an apologetic which draws freely on metaphysical arguments and historical evidence; or shall he make for the left, fideist bank and put his trust entirely in faith and subjective commitment?³⁶

At one level, Newbigin’s appropriation of Polanyi’s epistemological framework effectively nuances both these approaches by stressing ‘personal’ and ‘tacit’ indwelling as the key to any kind of knowledge – both scientific and religious. On closer inspection, however, Polanyi’s approach to epistemology yields rather more mixed results when it is applied by writers like Newbigin specifically to the reconstruction of a post-Enlightenment missiology.

In this context, we shall argue that whilst Polanyi is useful to Newbigin in the deconstruction of a false Enlightenment objectivity, he is less helpful in the reconstruction of an alternative approach. There are three main reasons for this: the first has to do with Polanyi’s presuppositional methodology, the second with his usefulness to the reconstruction of a specifically *missionary* theology, and the third with his contribution to Newbigin’s views on ‘commensurability’ and ‘conversion’. In a fourth section we will expand this latter discussion to incorporate the related influence of Thomas Kuhn’s work on ‘paradigm shifts’, and in a final section we draw attention to tensions and questions which have

³⁶ Mitchell 1994: 72-3.

arisen in the previous sections.

4.3.1 Polanyi and ‘method’

Polanyi’s usefulness in the task of reconstructing theology method in a post-Enlightenment context has been extensive.³⁷ Indeed, Avery Dulles commented in his 1984 article, ‘Faith, Church, and God: Insights from Michael Polanyi’, that: ‘A thoroughgoing renewal of theology along the lines indicated by Polanyi could profitably engage the joint efforts of many theologians for a considerable span of years.’³⁸ But apart from Newbigin, the most comprehensive and systematic use of his ideas thus far has been made by the Scottish systematic theologian, Thomas F. Torrance.³⁹ The fact that Torrance is first and foremost a systematician, whilst Newbigin is primarily a missiologist, itself raises important questions about the ‘manner’ in which Polanyi’s framework has been applied to the task of theology. In particular, a comparison between the use of Polanyi’s ideas by the two writers highlights the issue of the relative value of his work to the differing ‘branches’ or ‘disciplines’ of the theological enterprise. This important question has received no sustained treatment in discussions about

³⁷ In terms of longer works, see: Crewdson 1994; Gelwick (1965 and 1970); Gunton 1985; Paul 1987; Scott 1996 (= reprint of Scott 1985). Cf. also a number of articles suggesting connections between Polanyi’s ideas and the task of theology: Brownhill 1968; Dulles 1984; Gelwick 1982; Gill 1978; Hall 1982; Keiser 1987; Langford (1966 and 1968); Manno 1974; Prosch 1982; Scott 1970; Thorson (1981 and 1987); Ward 1998.

³⁸ Dulles 1984: 550.

³⁹ See in particular: Torrance 1969: 92f., 115f., 122f., etc.; and Torrance 1973 in which the ‘formal’ structure of theological enquiry is developed in parallel to Polanyi’s development of the structure of scientific enquiry. See also Torrance’s introduction to the volume of essays he edited on various aspects of the thought of Polanyi and their relationship to theological reflection (Torrance 1980). For a full-scale treatment of Torrance’s use of Polanyi, cf. Weightman 1994. See also the briefer discussion in McGrath 1999: 228-233.

Newbigin – a fact that is surprising, given the pervasiveness of Polanyi's influence upon him.

Before discussing Polanyi's appropriateness to Newbigin's specifically *missionary* theology, two more general aspects of Polanyi's 'method' and their broader relevance for theology call for attention. The first of these relates to his concept of 'heuristic passion' discussed in chapter 2. The second is the manner in which Polanyi's method effectively severs the connection between 'faith' and 'history'.

With regard to first of these, we noted in chapter 2 the fact that the framework within which the activity of exploration and integration operates is envisaged by Polanyi as being 'evolutionary'. As he puts it in his 1961 article 'Faith and Reason':

Knowing, as a dynamic force of comprehension, uncovers at each step a new hidden meaning. It reveals a universe of comprehensive entities which represent the meaning of their largely unspecifiable particulars. A universe constructed as an ascending hierarchy of meaning and excellence is very different from the picture of a chance collocation of atoms to which the examination of the universe by explicit modes of inference leads us. The vision of such a hierarchy inevitably sweeps on to envisage the meaning of the universe as a whole. Thus natural knowing expands continuously into knowledge of the supernatural.⁴⁰

From statements such as these it becomes clear that religious knowledge for Polanyi can be seen to represent the furthest possibility of heuristic and exploratory activity, the summit – as it were – of human endeavour. As a result of this, the process by which this goal is reached is appropriately described by verbs that involve the distinctive human activities of exploration and discovery. Thus, the vocabulary of 'probing', 'intuiting', 'indwelling' and so forth are

⁴⁰ Polanyi 1961: 246; cf. also 1964: 83-4 for his earliest reference to the possibility of religious knowledge in an evolutionary context (the book was originally published in 1946).

commonly used by him.⁴¹ But the point to note here is that such verbs describe an essentially *human* activity – an intellectual probing towards the fullest integrations of reality. As a result, they refer to concepts which – when transferred into a theological framework – are much more generally suited to a ‘liberal’ mindset within which the human element of ‘searching’ in the progress of faith is prominent. It is not therefore surprising that Paul Tillich is the theologian with whom Polanyi feels most at home. He comments for example in *Personal Knowledge* that:

Although I should not venture to declare that my argument in the present section agrees entirely with the views of any one theological writer, I find my own conception of the scope and method of a progressive Protestant theology confirmed by many passages in the writings of Paul Tillich.⁴²

This observation in itself raises serious questions about the natural suitability of a writer like Polanyi to the theology of Torrance or Newbigin, given that their respective intentions are so differently conceived. For example, whilst for Polanyi the notion of religious knowing is – as it were – the furthest projection of human discovery, for Torrance and Newbigin, it functions by contrast as its *a priori*. Similarly, whereas for Polanyi, the notion of religious knowledge is properly ‘subjective’ in being primarily a *human* activity, for Torrance and Newbigin such knowledge is given by means of ‘revelation’. Hence, it does not derive from a human ‘probing’ at all, but rather as a result of a divine disclosure *to* human beings. Human agency is not involved in the active

⁴¹ E.g., Polanyi 1958: 55-56, 59, 64, 130-1, 212, 321; 1959: 78-80; 1961: 242, 245; 1964: 40; 1966: 17-18; 1968: 404ff.; 1975: 44, 60, 96, 140-1, 145, etc..

⁴² Polanyi 1958: 283 (note 1). See also Polanyi 1961: 243. As an example of a theological appropriation of Polanyi’s scheme from a more ‘liberal’ perspective than, say, that of Torrance, cf. Manno 1974.

sense of 'doing' or 'searching', but in the passive sense of 'receiving', 'hearing' or 'being given understanding'. This being the case, a reconstruction of 'faith' on Polanyian terms is limited in its scope for theologians like Torrance and Newbigin whose presuppositions demand a radical revision of the 'direction' or 'flow' of Polanyi's methodology. Of course, neither Torrance nor Newbigin transfers Polanyi's 'liberal' agenda into their respective theologies, but both do make extensive use of Polanyi's specific vocabulary and phraseology, thus creating a tension between the conception of the supernatural as the *final* 'reality' sought (as in Polanyi's thought) and of supernatural revelation as that which is *initially given* (as in the work of Torrance and Newbigin).⁴³ We shall return to some further ramifications of this point shortly.

A second more 'general' aspect of Polanyi's method which calls for attention at this point is the way in which he effectively severs any necessary connection between 'faith' and 'history'.⁴⁴ For him, the 'truthfulness' of the Christian 'story' is not dependent upon whether or not certain historical events actually took place, but rather upon its 'believability' as a conceptual scheme which is able to provide an 'integrating meaning' to the deepest yearnings or intuitions of the human psyche. This point emerges most clearly in Polanyi's last book *Meaning* (published in 1975) in which his understanding of 'religion' is most fully developed. Here, in an analysis of the Christian framework of doctrines and beliefs such as the 'Fall', 'Redemption', or the 'ultimate victory through Christ', he writes that:

⁴³ Paradoxically therefore, at one level, both Newbigin and Torrance develop theologies which specifically refute Polanyi's approach.

⁴⁴ No doubt, this is one of the reasons why he finds the 'progressive Protestant' theology of Paul Tillich so congenial (see Polanyi 1958: 283: note 1).

None of these beliefs makes any literal sense. They can be destroyed as easily as the actuality of Polonius' death upon the stage, should anyone attempt to defend its reality in the world of facts. Both are works of the imagination, accepted by us as meaningful integrations of quite incompatible clues that move us deeply and help us to pull the scattered droplets of our lives together into a single sea of sublime meaning.⁴⁵

They are essentially 'myths', he argues, which some are 'ready to accept – even if *in fact* they are actual impossibilities.'⁴⁶ He proceeds to state that though the 'contents' of these biblical narratives may seem 'completely implausible to us', yet they still carry what he describes as 'a meaning expressing the whole significance of life and the universe in genuine and universal feeling terms. Then we can say: It does not matter. If not this story exactly, then *something like this* is somehow true . . .'⁴⁷

Remarks like these owe much to Polanyi's use of Mircea Eliade's work on mythology.⁴⁸ As a result of his interaction with this work, Polanyi comes to similar conclusions to Eliade with regard to the evaluation of claims about religious knowledge. For just as Eliade interprets the 'truth' of myths in the sense that they are to be understood essentially as 'projections' of the human imagination, so Polanyi similarly envisages religious experience in terms of its ability to transport the believer outside of what he describes as 'secular time'⁴⁹ (involving its 'temporal frame',⁵⁰ or 'the disjointed "dailiness" of our lives'⁵¹) and into an abstracted 'out-of-this-world' arena (which he calls – following

⁴⁵ Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 157.

⁴⁶ Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 158.

⁴⁷ Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 159 (emphasis original).

⁴⁸ Eliade 1961. Cf. especially chapter 8 of Polanyi and Prosch 1975 ('The Structure of Myth', 120-131) in which he specifically discusses pertinent aspects of Eliade's work.

⁴⁹ Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 159.

⁵⁰ Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 154.

⁵¹ Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 156.

Eliade – the ‘Great Time’⁵²). It is in this sphere that the intimations of religion make ultimate sense.⁵³

In addition to this, Polanyi also makes a formal distinction between the kind of ‘integrations’ that human knowing makes possible in the scientific realm, and those that can be made in the religious environment. The former he describes as ‘self-centred’ integrations, in the sense that they are made *‘from the self as a center . . . to the object of our focal attention.’*⁵⁴ The latter he calls ‘self-giving’ integrations, ‘in which not only the symbol becomes integrated but the self also becomes integrated as it is carried away by the symbol – or given *to it.*’⁵⁵ The former are integrated back ‘into’ the self, whereas in the latter, the individual is ‘carried away’ by the object of attention. This distinction between ‘self-centered’ and ‘self-giving’ integrations itself raises the question of the extent to which Polanyi is able to view religious knowledge as in any sense ‘objective’. This is an issue which he addresses in the conclusion to his discussion about religious knowing. Here he writes:

Let us ask . . . what sort of possibility the sacred myths that inform religious rites must have in order to gain our acceptance. We see at once that their possibility cannot lie in our regarding their accounts of events as factually true in the sense of day-to-day possibilities. That is, their possibility cannot lie in our conceiving the events as they represent them as actually having occurred in secular time – at least not *as* such events as these would occur in secular time – because their very detachment rests upon their events being understood as having occurred rather in that ‘Great Time’ – that out-of-this-world time – that Eliade speaks of.⁵⁶

The point to notice here is the distinction that Polanyi makes between the

⁵² Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 152, 153, 154, 156, quoting from Eliade 1961: 59.

⁵³ See the whole section in Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 149-160.

⁵⁴ Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 71 (emphasis original).

⁵⁵ Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 75 (emphasis original).

⁵⁶ Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 158-9 (emphasis original).

temporal spheres in which 'faith' and 'history' are seen to operate. It emerges that the reality or coherence of faith has no necessary causal connection with historical events. Rather it is a projection of the human imagination in which the 'truthfulness' of religious statements is abstracted from the everyday reality of concrete and historical affairs. In this connection, Polanyi's biographer Harry Prosch comments that: '[Polanyi] really had a difficult time understanding a belief in the factual reality of the supernatural in religion as anything more than magic or superstition.'⁵⁷

These observations carry weight for any methodology that relies heavily upon Polanyi's conceptual scheme, and yet particularly for any that aim (as Newbigin's does) to maintain a more theologically orthodox and 'conservative' stance. In this context the adoption by Newbigin of the obverse of Polanyi's argument about the 'subjectivity' of scientific knowledge (i.e., that religious knowing is correspondingly 'objective') is not supported by Polanyi's conclusions, and depends upon an understanding of the 'unified' nature of the reality in which both are said to operate.

This tension in Polanyi's thought-world is often misunderstood or passed over altogether. As Ronald Hall has argued, it paradoxically reveals a more overt drift in Polanyi's later thinking towards the very positivistic distinctions that in his earlier books he had specifically set out to undermine: distinctions between a 'scientific' knowledge on the one hand that is open to experimentation and empirical verification (and which is therefore 'objective' in the traditional sense of the word), and 'artistic' or 'religious' knowledge on the other which is much

⁵⁷ Prosch 1986: 255. See also the discussions in Haddox 1982, and Hall 1982.

more subjective and is not open to the same tests.⁵⁸ Indeed, Harry Prosch has argued convincingly that this tension is already apparent in his earlier book, *Personal Knowledge*.⁵⁹ This suggests that even within Polanyi's own conceptual scheme there remains a distinction between the comparative modes of verification relevant to scientific knowledge on the one hand, and those relevant to artistic or religious knowledge on the other.

This in turn raises more general questions about the transfer of a Polanyian 'framework' into the theological schemes of writers like Torrance and Newbigin. Avery Dulles, in the article referred to above, shrewdly comments that: 'If I am not mistaken, Polanyi's value for theology lies less in what he explicitly stated about theological questions than in the transfer value of what he had to say about science.'⁶⁰ The transfer of both – he seems to imply – involves potential problems.

Certainly, the 'broadest' transference is to be seen in the work of Torrance, where one does sometimes get the impression that Polanyi's views about religion are being treated as the logical epistemological corollary of his views about science, rather than as an accurate reflection of Polanyi's actual stated opinions. Polanyi's material, in this 'reading', is presented as much more fully in support of Torrance's positions than Polanyi himself would have allowed, and does not take sufficient cognisance of Polanyi's divergent views on the

⁵⁸ Hall 1982: esp. 14-15.

⁵⁹ See Prosch 1986: esp. 249ff., and the references to *Personal Knowledge* cited there. Cf. also Weightman 1994: 61 (note 42), where Weightman refers to an unpublished typescript of a conversation between Polanyi and Tillich in 1963 in which Polanyi refers to the concept of religion as 'an extension of the transnatural existence possessed by the arts' (foreshadowing much of the discussion in his later book, *Meaning*).

⁶⁰ Dulles 1984: 550.

relationship between the conception of religious knowledge on the one hand and that of scientific knowledge on the other.⁶¹

But to interpret Polanyi's meaning in this way, is to some significant degree to *reinterpret* his basic framework, transferring what he says about science and applying it to what Torrance (and Newbigin) want to say about theology.⁶² Their work in this context might best be described therefore as a theological appropriation of what Polanyi says about science. What it is *not* is a reading of what Polanyi actually says about theology. For Polanyi, the notion of a 'transcendent being' revealing himself within history is never even a possibility in his framework of thought, let alone the *starting point* for such a framework.

So far as Polanyi's scheme of thought itself is concerned, this 'disparity' between the comparative modes of 'scientific' and 'religious' verification does not present a major problem. For though he periodically makes statements that appear to support a religious and/or theological outlook,⁶³ it is clear that this was not his main objective, nor – for that matter – that he was a Christian believer himself.⁶⁴ The weight of his own interest lay more generally in *de*-throning the

⁶¹ See, for example, the 'Christianising' of Polanyi's material in Torrance 1973: 164, where Torrance infers that Polanyi's references to 'indwelling' recall Jesus' speaking about 'mutual indwelling' in John 14. Polanyi's views are then taken and incorporated by Torrance in a manner that suggests that Polanyi is in agreement with his wider understanding of theological science. For a similar critique of Torrance's use of Polanyi, cf. Prosch 1986: esp. 235-257, and, more generally, Weightman 1994. For a treatment more sympathetic to the convergences between the two, see McGrath 1999: esp. 228-233.

⁶² Interestingly, though Newbigin refers to Torrance three times in his writings (Newbigin 1976a: 288 – as part of a Festschrift for Torrance; 1989f: 29; and 1995d: 74), this is never in direct relation to discussions of Polanyi. Nevertheless, there is a marked similarity in their appropriations. Where they differ is in Newbigin's more direct appropriation of Polanyi's *cultural* analysis discussed in chapter 2.

⁶³ Alongside the above reference to his agreement with Tillich, Polanyi's 'theological' and 'religious' contributions would include his approval of Augustine (discussed in more detail below), and the following passages: Polanyi 1964 (orig. 1946): 83-4 ; 1958: 279-298; 1961: 237-247; 1966: 92; 1975: 149-160, 179-181.

⁶⁴ Cf. the conclusions of Terence Kennedy in Prosch 1986: 256: 'Honesty demands that we acknowledge that Polanyi was not religiously committed nor did he have religious faith as this is understood in Christian theology.' Cf. also Prosch 1982: esp. 46-48, for his reply to

(Note continued on next page.)

dominant Enlightenment paradigm of knowledge than in specifically *en*-throning the possibility of any particular ‘brand’ of religious knowledge – particularly of a ‘revelatory’ type.

4.3.2 Polanyi and the reconstruction of ‘missionary’ theology

These observations about Polanyi’s methodological presuppositions have serious implications for the interpretation of Newbigin’s work. At this point, however, we will draw an important distinction between Newbigin and Torrance. Hitherto in our discussion, we have discussed Torrance and Newbigin in the same context as examples of theologians (both within the ‘reformed tradition’) who have made use of Polanyi’s ideas. But, whereas Torrance is a theologian who utilises Polanyi in the reconstruction of theology from a ‘systematic’ point of view, Newbigin is overtly a ‘missiologist’. We shall now develop the case that whilst in certain respects Polanyi is well-suited to the systematic enterprise, his use in an overtly missiological context is more problematic.

From a systematic point of view, insofar as theology seeks more coherently to define its own nature and to understand its own methodology, Polanyi’s insights to some extent can be seen to be both beneficial and creative. Indeed – as Torrance himself amply demonstrates – the application of Polanyi’s approach promises to bring a greater coherence to the field of theological enquiry than was ever possible within a purely positivist approach which tended, for example, to distinguish and then atomise the different aspects of theological

Gelwick 1982, who takes a different view. It is noteworthy that Newbigin was himself agnostic about Polanyi’s personal faith (cf. his specific comment in 1985c: 8; also the comments in 1996a: iv-v).

enquiry.⁶⁵ But reflection on the observations already made about Polanyi's method lead us to the conclusion that Polanyi's thought-world is far *more* conducive to this type of 'intra-systemic' analysis (that is, of describing Christian belief in terms of its *self*-understanding), than it is to the discussion of 'extra-systemic' strategies (such as the apologetic engagement with those who are *outsiders* to the Christian faith).

We will now argue that this is a crucial issue for Newbigin. To put this in more specifically apologetic terms, the following analysis will explore two connected theses. Firstly, it will contend that inasmuch as Polanyi's insights have value, they are likely to be more effective at persuading those who are committed to an objectivist view of the scientific method that the scientific discipline itself is more 'subjective' and 'fiduciary' than was supposed, than it will be at persuading sceptics about religion that Christian faith is more 'objective' than was thought to be the case. Secondly, we will argue that inasmuch as Polanyi's work has value for a missiologist like Newbigin, this value is to be seen more exclusively in its potential ability to make Christians more confident about their own *existing* faith rather than in its potential 'persuasional' power as far as drawing non-believers to an initial confession of faith is concerned. In other words its value will be 'intra-systemic' rather than 'extra-systemic'. From a strictly 'missiological' point of view, therefore, we will argue that the value of Polanyi's apologetic is somewhat limited.

This conclusion arises primarily from the fact that within Polanyi's thought-world, the process of 'intuition' whereby frameworks and integrations are identified in the field of 'reality', necessarily works on the *prior* assumption

⁶⁵ E.g., Torrance 1973: esp. 162-3.

that there *is* a ‘reality’ on which these human ‘intuitions’ or ‘hunches’ have to work. This fact is predicated by Polanyi upon the unitary nature of the world and its openness to discovery.⁶⁶ His programme proceeds on the understanding that the furtherance of knowledge results from the indwelling of personal (and fiduciary) intuitions about this ‘reality’ and the subsequent integration of such insights into a wider framework of understanding. From these assumptions, the ‘knower’ advances in knowledge, and is led to deeper apprehensions of truth.

In a 1967 article, Polanyi sets out to explain ‘how the actual process of discovery is performed.’⁶⁷ Here he writes that:

To see a good problem is to see something hidden and yet accessible. This is done by integrating some raw experiences into clues pointing to a possible gap in our knowledge. To undertake a problem is to commit one-self to the belief that you can fill in this gap and make thereby a new contact with reality. Such a commitment must be passionate; a problem which does not worry us, that does not excite us, is not a problem; it does not exist. Evidence is cast up only by a surmise filled with its own particular hope and fervently bent on fulfilling this hope. *Without such passionate commitment no supporting evidence will emerge, nor failure to find such evidence be felt; no conclusions will be drawn and tested – no quest will take place.*⁶⁸

The process of discovery therefore is predicated upon a pre-existing and passionate commitment to the likelihood of an ‘integration of knowledge’ that such an investigation will bring. Polanyi assumes of course that scientists already possess this ‘hunger’ for knowledge, otherwise they would not presumably have become scientists in the first place. Indeed, Polanyi writes elsewhere that, ‘no one can become a scientist unless he presumes that the scientific doctrine and method are fundamentally sound and that their ultimate premisses can be

⁶⁶ Polanyi 1958: e.g., 161-2.

⁶⁷ Polanyi 1967: 195.

⁶⁸ Polanyi 1967: 195 (emphasis added).

unquestioningly accepted.’⁶⁹ Interestingly, he then adds that, ‘We have here an instance of the process described epigrammatically by the Christian Church Fathers in the words: *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith in search of understanding.’⁷⁰

But – by its very presuppositions – this exposition does not actually explain how an initial ‘conversion’ to the love of science takes place. Such a beginning is assumed as a ‘given’ – as his reference to the Church Fathers implies. It *begins* with ‘faith’, and – from this basis – seeks further understanding. As Polanyi himself states in a 1948 article, ‘scepticism cannot in itself discover anything new. It can release our powers of discovery, but these powers must always spring from belief.’⁷¹ Moreover, when Polanyi specifically discusses these ideas in the context of *religious* faith, the same presupposition about a pre-existing commitment to the existence of the ‘reality’ for which one probes becomes apparent. So for example in his book *Science, Faith and Society*, after describing many forms of the exploratory process that he describes as ‘guessing right’, he states that: ‘Among these I would include also the prayerful search for God.’⁷² He proceeds to illustrate this with the example of Augustine’s ‘long labours to achieve faith in Christianity’⁷³ and concludes with the significant statement that: ‘All these processes of creative guesswork have in common that

⁶⁹ Polanyi 1964: 45; also 15, where he comments significantly: ‘Since an art cannot be precisely defined, it can be transmitted only by examples of the practice which embodies it.’

⁷⁰ Polanyi 1964: 45 (emphasis original). We shall return to the significance of this statement later in the thesis.

⁷¹ Polanyi 1948: 100.

⁷² Polanyi 1964: 34.

⁷³ Polanyi 1964: 35.

they are guided by the urge to make contact with a reality, *which is felt to be there already to start with*, waiting to be apprehended.’⁷⁴

But the transfer of this conception – with its understanding of a pre-existing commitment to the existence of the ‘reality’ for which one probes – is much more problematic when applied missiologically. For, in this framework, what is to be made of the reality of religious ‘unbelief’ – especially when it manifests an inherent scepticism that there *is* anything to discover? How therefore does one interest an unbeliever in the claims of Christianity when there exists no ‘passionate’ intuition on which to build in the first place? Here the distinctions between Torrance and Newbigin become more acute. Systematicians like Torrance can afford to be reticent or even silent about this question (simply because there may be felt to be no need to discuss such matters in the context of a systematic presentation of Christian belief from the point of view of its self-understanding). They are able therefore to *assume* a starting point of faith (just as Polanyi assumes a pre-existing intuition) and to proceed on this basis towards a descriptive analysis of the theological enterprise from a Christian point of view. Indeed, Torrance – significantly from the point of view of the present discussion – calls his resulting articulation of theology a ‘theological science’.⁷⁵ Both he and Polanyi (in their respective fields) proceed from the assumption that the enquirer is – for want of a better expression – ‘already a believer’, and all the concepts that are subsequently utilised in the process of describing the path to deeper knowledge are able to assume such an outlook as their foundational

⁷⁴ Polanyi 1964: 35 (emphasis added).

⁷⁵ Torrance 1969.

premise.⁷⁶

But these assumptions are more problematic for Newbigin because his theology does not set out to be 'systematic' in the sense that Torrance's does, but is intended to be primarily missiological in its engagement with contemporary Western culture. It cannot therefore assume a starting point of faith, but must grapple instead with the fact that for many people there simply *is* none. It is striking therefore that Polanyi's vocabulary pervades the discussions at the points where Newbigin himself articulates the process of discovery. In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, for example, he is characteristically indebted to Polanyi's basic framework of knowledge when he writes as follows:

There is surely always more truth to be discovered. That this is so is one of the things that lie at the heart of life – even of the life of animals and birds. The curiosity which is always seeking to discover more seems to be one of the necessary conditions of life. *But seeking is only serious if the seeker is following some clue, has some intuition of what it is that he seeks, and is willing to commit himself or herself to following that clue, that intuition.* Merely wandering around in a clue-less twilight is not seeking. The relativism which is not willing to speak about truth but only about 'what is true for me' is an evasion of the serious business of living. It is the mark of a tragic loss of nerve in our contemporary culture. It is a preliminary symptom of death.⁷⁷

When he returns to this theme later on, in the course of a discussion about the process of scientific discovery, his language is reminiscent of the way in which he has already described the discovery of truth more generally. Newbigin's repetition of Polanyian ideas at this point serves to underline the fact that his articulation of the process of spiritual discovery corresponds with his

⁷⁶ In this context we agree with Thomas Langford's comment (Langford 1966: 50) that for Polanyi, 'there is no *theologia irrogenitorum* (theology of the unregenerate).' What we *do* have, he argues, is 'a confessional base for religious assertion, but it is a base that is advantaged by its self-awareness.'

⁷⁷ Newbigin 1989f: 22 (emphasis added).

understanding of scientific discovery, and that both are reliant upon a Polanyian framework. At this later point, he writes:

There are no logical rules by which one can learn how to make new discoveries. . . . It has much more to do with intuition and imagination – the intuition that there is a problem waiting to be tackled, a configuration of things waiting to be discerned, an orderliness not yet manifest but hidden and waiting to be discovered. And it is a matter of personal judgment between alternative possibilities for experiment and research, personal judgment also in distinguishing between a meaningful pattern and a set of random events.⁷⁸

Polanyian language therefore pervades not only Newbigin's approach to scientific discovery, but also provides the means whereby he understands and describes the process of 'spiritual' discovery as well. It too is couched in Polanyi's terms of a pre-existing 'interest' or curiosity, to which the process of heuristic discovery will subsequently give meaning. This, as we have seen, provides potentially fruitful material in a more systematic presentation of Christian doctrine, but the specific issue for Newbigin is whether it helps him to develop a more specifically 'missionary' theology.

For Newbigin's reconstruction of a missiological engagement with contemporary culture, therefore, the specific issues surrounding the initial point of 'conversion' – along with the more general question of the role of apologetics in this context – present themselves as being potentially problematic. Furthermore, these questions are particularly relevant for Newbigin because his project is not narrowly conceived as a defence of why *some* people (and not others) come to faith. If this were the case, the Polanyian conception of an initial 'intuitive' interest might have supported and informed his analysis. But Newbigin's project is specifically intended to do much more than this. It is

⁷⁸ Newbigin 1989f: 44.

nothing less than a plea for what he calls ‘a genuinely missionary encounter with post- Enlightenment culture’.⁷⁹

In this context, the questions raised by our analysis become acute. How does the Church engage with the outsider where there is no pre-existing interest? How can the gospel be accepted as ‘public truth’ where there is no ‘public’ willingness or hunger to investigate what that truth might mean? Whether Newbigin is able to move beyond this Polanyian framework in his understanding of these issues is crucial if his Christian engagement with non-Christian culture is to carry weight.

4.3.3 Polanyi on ‘conversion’ and religious language

These central tensions are given further emphasis in our view by the similarity of Newbigin’s exposition to that of Polanyi with regard to the understanding of the concept of ‘conversion’ and the accompanying approach to the question of language. In order to develop this discussion, we will first examine Polanyi’s own views and draw implications for Newbigin’s programme. Then in the following section we will incorporate into the ongoing argument a discussion of ‘paradigm shifts’ in the writings of Thomas Kuhn. Not only are Polanyi’s views very similar to those of Kuhn, but – more pertinently – Newbigin himself is explicitly indebted to Kuhn’s work in his discussions about conversion. The purpose of this analysis is to investigate the extent to which Newbigin is able to circumvent the questions raised with regard to the ‘entry’ point of ‘outsiders’ to the community of faith.

⁷⁹ Newbigin 1983b: 31.

With regard to the concept of ‘conversion’ (in both religious and non-religious contexts), Polanyi writes as follows in his book *Meaning*:

It seems clear that we do not become converted – whether to a political party, a philosophy, *or* a religion – by having the truth of what we become converted to demonstrated to us in a wholly logical or objective way. Rather, what happens when we become converted is that we see at some point that the particular party or religion or epistemology or world view (or even scientific theory) in front of us holds possibilities for the attainment of richer meanings than the one we have been getting along with. At that moment we *are* converted, whether we have ever willed it or not; . . .⁸⁰

‘Conversion’ in this context involves the transfer of allegiance from an assent to one set of attitudes and beliefs to another. But this ‘transfer’ is not the result of argument or debate: it is not ‘logical’ in this sense. In Polanyi’s understanding, ‘conversion’ involves a ‘switch’ of allegiance. It involves a change of perspective, but with no strict conceptual ‘bridge’ between one way of viewing things and the other. As a result, the practice of verbal argument and debate by adherents of a particular paradigm cannot – by its very nature – result in the persuasion of those who are presently outside that conceptual framework. Referring to attempts to persuade others of a ‘new idea in science’, for example, Polanyi writes that ‘we cannot convince others by formal argument, for so long as we argue within their framework we can never induce them to abandon it.’⁸¹

As a result of this:

The two conflicting systems of thought are separated by a logical gap, in the same sense as a problem is separated from the discovery which solves the problem. Formal operations relying on *one* framework of interpretation cannot demonstrate a proposition to persons who rely on *another* framework.⁸²

⁸⁰ Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 180 (emphasis original).

⁸¹ Polanyi 1958: 151.

⁸² Polanyi 1958: 151 (emphasis original).

This conclusion is given further emphasis by Polanyi's views about the nature of language. For example, in continuing the quotation cited above, he states that in the realm of science the advocates of a new idea, 'may not even succeed in getting a hearing [from their opponents] . . . since they must first teach them a new language, and no one can learn a new language unless he first trusts that it means something.'⁸³ Hence the barriers to understanding are enshrined in the need to learn the language system of a different tradition.⁸⁴ The other tradition must in some sense be 'entered' before an understanding of its thought-world is acquired.

This conception of the contingency of language is applied first and foremost by Polanyi to debates about the appropriation of new ideas *within* the scientific field. But it is also carried over into his wider discussions – including his analysis of the way in which 'religious' vocabulary operates. In this context, language again sets its own circumscribing and regulative parameters, with the result that the understanding of its grammar is reached only through a participation in religious worship, whose practice it reflects.⁸⁵ Consequently he writes that, 'Only a Christian who stands in the service of his faith can understand Christian theology and only he can enter into the religious meaning of the Bible.'⁸⁶ Hence, to transfer Polanyi's understanding into a missiological context would imply that a 'grounding' in the vocabulary of Christian faith is needed before an outsider can adopt a meaningful appropriation of Christian belief. But

⁸³ Polanyi 1958: 151.

⁸⁴ Polanyi rarely mentions the work of Wittgenstein, but his views at this point are very similar. See e.g., Daly 1968.

⁸⁵ Polanyi 1958: 281.

⁸⁶ Polanyi 1958: 281.

this grounding is by its very nature inseparable from the community of faith within which such language is used and articulated.⁸⁷

In terms of the apologetic appropriation of these central Polanyian insights, therefore, they can be said to be more conducive to those strategies which seek to develop the idea of the Church *in its corporate witness* as the primary means whereby outsiders come to faith, than they will be to the more specific strategies of verbal apologetics and persuasion which are carried out in the more ‘public’ interface between faith and unbelief. The need for this ecclesiological perspective, of course, is not to be denied. It is not surprisingly a dominant theme within Newbigin’s own writings – particularly in relation to his affirmation that if people are to become Christians in our day, they will do so because of the witness of the local congregation as the ‘hermeneutic of the gospel’.⁸⁸ Perhaps, particularly in a postmodern environment, the need for a demonstration of the gospel is as important in engaging non-Christians as is the articulation of that Gospel via the spoken word. But the point here is whether Polanyi’s insights will help to take the task of apologetics further than this. In terms of Newbigin’s missiological ‘positioning’ it is a question of whether

⁸⁷ See e.g., Polanyi 1958: 281: ‘. . . theology pursued as an axiomatization of the Christian faith has an important analytic task. Though its results can be understood only by practising Christians, it can greatly help them to understand what they are practising.’ The parallels with Lindbeck’s ‘intra-textual’ approach at this point are very striking. For a further discussion of Polanyi’s view of conversion, cf. Barr 1980; Keiser 1987 (who discusses the connections with Augustine); and more generally, Dulles 1984. Significantly, Barr’s discussion of the application of Polanyi’s insights to a Christian understanding of conversion is developed along lines that highlight the problems we are raising. For example, he seeks to apply Polanyi’s understanding of ‘conversion’ to both ‘gradual’ and ‘sudden’ understandings, and proceeds to use Paul’s experience as an example of the latter (61ff.). However, the role of ‘religious tradition’ in Paul’s pre-conversion life (what Polanyi would call his ‘apprenticeship’ within Judaism) would strongly suggest that his was not actually a ‘sudden’ conversion at all. His apprehension of the identity of Jesus was certainly ‘new’, but he was not ‘suddenly’ converted from a context of ‘no faith’ into a context of ‘faith’.

⁸⁸ E.g., Newbigin 1980c: 12, 26, 37; 1987b: 4-5; 1988c: 175; 1989f: 222ff.; 1990c: 339; 1995c: 150.

Polanyi's insights enable Newbigin to move out of the 'territory' occupied by writers like Stanley Hauerwas, George Lindbeck or John Milbank, for whom the concept of the Church as 'community' is equally important, and for whom the 'indwelling' of the narrative, rather than reliance upon apologetic 'methodologies' constitutes the substance of its 'witness'.

The foregoing discussion therefore highlights both the strength and the weakness of Polanyi's thought for a missiologist like Newbigin. On the one hand we have seen that it contributes admirably to the 'intra-systemic' task of explicating the process of theological self-definition and discovery. Newbigin is indebted to Polanyi at this level, developing his insights in terms of the Christian community's 'indwelling' of the Bible,⁸⁹ his articulation of a 'provisional' and progressive view of Christian discipleship which leads to fresh discoveries and integrations,⁹⁰ and his challenge to the Church to be increasingly a community in which the gospel is truly incarnated.⁹¹ All this is productive and powerful – both in galvanising faith and in giving confidence to hesitant Christians that they can hold onto their faith with integrity.

On the other hand, by its lack of a 'theology of unbelief', it accentuates for Newbigin the need to develop a more coherent apologetic, particularly in the context of a 'post-Christian' West in which both apathy and scepticism are so prevalent. In his indebtedness to Polanyi, therefore, Newbigin's apologetic is inevitably less developed than it might be in terms of what we might call its 'proactive' or 'engaging' aspects. For at the point of interface between unbelief and faith, apart from relatively few references to 'telling the story', there is

⁸⁹ E.g., Newbigin 1988e: 106; 1989g: 6; 1989f: 98; 1995d: 47.

⁹⁰ E.g., Newbigin 1989f: 35; 1991f: 53; 1993b: 346; 1995d: 43.

⁹¹ E.g., Newbigin 1983b: 23; 1985c: 8; 1986b: 124ff.; 1989f: 96, 99, 140; 1994b.

remarkably little specific exposition of what it might mean to articulate the good news verbally to a non-believing culture.

4.3.4 Thomas Kuhn and ‘paradigm shifts’

We now move to a consideration of Newbigin’s attraction to the work of Thomas Kuhn. This is partly because Kuhn’s work is similar in its conclusions to certain aspects of Polanyi’s,⁹² but partly also because it is in his references to Kuhn that Newbigin reveals himself most clearly as a believer in aspects of the ‘incommensurability’ of traditions.

Kuhn’s reconstruction of the way in which revolutions take place within the scientific community have been immensely influential in the field of the philosophy of science.⁹³ His use of the concept of ‘paradigm shifts’ to explain how a crisis within one paradigm of knowledge is replaced by another has been

⁹² MacIntyre, for example, argues that Kuhn is indebted to Polanyi for his basic insight into the nature of paradigms: namely, that traditions of enquiry are basically unitary and self-contained (MacIntyre 1977). Moreover, he argues that Kuhn has developed his ideas from Polanyi, but that he ‘nowhere acknowledges any such debt’ (1977: 465). This is not true, for Kuhn pays tribute to Polanyi in Kuhn 1970c: 44, and refers to Polanyi’s examples, in Kuhn 1977: 262. Most significantly, he acknowledges Polanyi’s work in the reported discussion following a paper given by Kuhn in Oxford in 1961 at which Polanyi was present, (Kuhn 1963). It was here that Kuhn had introduced the term ‘paradigm’, commenting (following Polanyi’s favourable reaction to the paper) that: ‘though I have only recently recognized it as such, Mr. Polanyi himself has provided the most extensive and developed discussion I know of the aspect of science which led me to my apparently strange usage’. In terms of the concept of ‘incommensurability’ (a term also invented by Kuhn) the two writers are certainly in broad agreement (cf. e.g., Polanyi 1964: 66-7, for his views about the ‘incommensurability’ of the religious and scientific worlds). For a discussion of the differences between them, see Poirier 1989, who argues that whereas Kuhn is fundamentally ‘relativist’ and ‘subjective’ in his approach to the possibility of ‘truth’, Polanyi (though not a ‘neutralist’) is certainly an ‘objectivist’ - ‘in the manner in which the word was understood prior to the rise of positivist thinking in the field of epistemological studies’ (276). (*Continued on next page*) Whilst this contrast holds in relation to the two writers’ views about science, Poirier’s conclusions need to be nuanced in relation to Polanyi’s views about religious knowledge, discussed earlier in this chapter.

⁹³ For an overview of this use, see Gutting 1980.

used extensively in a number of disciplines, not least theology.⁹⁴ More particularly, for our purposes, it is repeatedly referred to by Newbigin in terms of its distinct parallels with the notion of ‘conversion’.⁹⁵ In the discussion that follows, we will examine Newbigin’s use of Kuhn’s concept of ‘paradigm shifts’ as it appears in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* as this is the only work of Kuhn’s that Newbigin refers to.⁹⁶

Kuhn makes a fundamental distinction between what he calls ‘normal’ and ‘revolutionary’ science. By ‘normal science’, Kuhn signifies ‘research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice.’⁹⁷ At points of crisis in the continuing viability of this older framework, however, a new paradigm may emerge which provokes a ‘revolution’. He writes accordingly that:

... scientific revolutions are inaugurated by a growing sense, again often restricted to a narrow subdivision of the scientific community, that an existing paradigm has ceased to function adequately in the exploration of an aspect of nature to which that paradigm itself had previously led the way.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ See the symposium collected in Küng and Tracy 1989. Küng’s own primary application of the idea is to an understanding of the different *historical* epochs of Christianity and its contemporary implications (cf. Küng and Tracy 1989: 3-33, 212-219; and Küng 1991: 122-129). His approach has influenced David Bosch’s appraisal of mission (Bosch 1991). See esp. 183-189 for Bosch’s methodological indebtedness to Küng.

⁹⁵ E.g., Newbigin 1986b: 62: ‘The boundary between (the secular) community and the society for which the Bible is not determinative is marked by the paradigm shift that is traditionally called conversion’, and 64: ‘This will be not only a conversion of the will and the feelings but a conversion of the mind – a “paradigm shift” that leads to a new vision of how things are . . .’ Cf. also, 1979b: 302-4, 306; 1979a: 209; 1983b: 31; 1984a: 15; 1988e: 108; 1989f: 44; 1993a: 91; 1994d: 81; 1996c: 53.

⁹⁶ Newbigin makes eleven references in all to Kuhn’s book (all to the 1970 2nd edition). That Kuhn subsequently modified his views in the light of later criticism is significant for a study of Kuhn, but not of Newbigin. For such revisions, see e.g., Kuhn 1970b, and 1977 (esp. 293-339).

⁹⁷ Kuhn 1970c: 10.

⁹⁸ Kuhn 1970c: 92.

What emerges from Kuhn's discussion is an image of science as being 'holistic' in the sense that 'facts' are both theory-laden and community-dependent, and that competing scientific 'paradigms' are either accepted or rejected as 'wholes'.⁹⁹ When a new paradigm is entered, it is not as a result of a step-by-step process of reason and logic, regulated by an independent use of authority to which both traditions might submit. It is rather by a shift of perspective that is similar to what might be described as a 'conversion' experience.¹⁰⁰ With respect, therefore, to the way in which different groups of scientists (inhabiting different conceptual paradigms) will always tend to see matters from their own distinctive perspectives, Kuhn states that:

... before they can hope to communicate fully, one group or the other must experience the conversion that we have been calling a paradigm shift. Just because it is a transition between incommensurables, the transition between competing paradigms cannot be made a step at a time, forced by logic and neutral experience. Like the gestalt switch, it must occur all at once (though not necessarily in an instant) or not at all.¹⁰¹

Part of the reason for this is Kuhn's commitment to the view that traditions, when they change in their conceptual framework, display no inherent continuity with the paradigms that preceded them. As a consequence of this, he says that:

... at times of revolution, when the normal-scientific tradition changes, the scientist's perception of his environment must be re-educated – in some familiar situations he must learn to see a new gestalt. After he has done so the world of his research will seem, here and there, incommensurable with the one he had inhabited before.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ See e.g., Kuhn 1970c: 170 for his resulting views about the nature of 'truth' ('We may ... have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth').

¹⁰⁰ Kuhn 1970c: 150. 150: 'The transfer of allegiance from paradigm to paradigm is a conversion experience that cannot be forced.'

¹⁰¹ Kuhn 1970c: 150.

¹⁰² Kuhn 1970c: 112.

At such points (when ‘normal science’ is interrupted by a crisis which leads to ‘revolution’), the basis upon which the switch to the new paradigm is made is not that of logical inference, nor that of the normal process of experimentation which might lead to a more natural evolution towards a change of perspective, but rather a sociological or psychological switch of allegiance. When such a decision is taken, Kuhn argues, it cannot be made on the basis of the existing evidence. Rather, it ‘can only be made on faith.’¹⁰³ ‘Faith’ in this context is the ‘faith that the new paradigm will succeed with the many large problems that confront it, knowing only that the older paradigm has failed with a few.’¹⁰⁴

There are many Polanyian connections here – not least in the way in which Kuhn’s view of the new paradigm is expressed in terms of its potential ability to produce better future integrations of truth. But, more importantly for our purposes, Kuhn’s work finds central resonances in Newbigin’s writing. Critical here are Newbigin’s references to Kuhn’s notion of scientific ‘paradigm shifts’ to make what is – in effect – a similar point about the ‘incommensurability’ between pre-Christian and post-Christian thinking. ‘There is’, he argues – referring to Kuhn, ‘no logical process by which Newtonian physics can accommodate the theories of Einstein. There is a leap, a conversion, a “paradigm shift”.’¹⁰⁵ He goes on:

From a perspective outside the Christian faith, on the other hand, the gospel is and remains incomprehensible . . . I do not believe that this element of scandal can be eliminated from the faithful communication of the gospel. This is not a love of irrationality for its own sake. It is not to echo Tertullian’s ‘*Credo quia absurdum est*’. It is to recognise that a wider rationality which can justify the

¹⁰³ Kuhn 1970c: 158.

¹⁰⁴ Kuhn 1970c: 158.

¹⁰⁵ Newbigin 1979a: 209.

ways of God to man is not obtainable except on the other side of that radical change of perspective which has traditionally been called conversion.¹⁰⁶

Two comments are in order here. Firstly, Newbigin agrees with Kuhn that ‘conversion’ from one paradigm to another is not the result of a logical step-by-step progression from the one position to the other. ‘As Kuhn shows,’ he argues,

no over-arching logical system can justify the switch from one vision to the other; it is a conversion to a different way of seeing things which always needs new language. The only test is adequacy to the reality which is to be understood and coped with.¹⁰⁷

There exists therefore a radical discontinuity between the two paradigms, he argues, which necessitates the language of ‘conversion’ rather than that of ‘demonstration’,¹⁰⁸ and which requires a ‘new language’ so that the fresh paradigm may be articulated.¹⁰⁹ The reason for this is that ‘(t)he new paradigm cannot demonstrate its “reasonableness” on the terms of the old.’¹¹⁰ Or again, ‘In every culture the Christian vision of how things are calls for a conversion and for the use of new language, none of which can be shown to be deducible from the reigning plausibility structure.’¹¹¹ The arena of faith for Newbigin, therefore, is fundamentally incommensurable with that of unbelief when viewed from the perspective of the non-believer.

But alongside this agreement, there is – secondly – a point of

¹⁰⁶ Newbigin 1979a: 209.

¹⁰⁷ Newbigin 1994d: 81. Cf. also: Newbigin 1993a: 91; 1996c: 53.

¹⁰⁸ E.g., Newbigin 1984a: 15.

¹⁰⁹ Newbigin 1994d: 81: ‘As Kuhn shows, no over-arching logical system can justify the switch from one vision to the other: it is a conversion to a different way of seeing things which always needs new language.’ Also 1993a: 91-92; 1996c: 53.

¹¹⁰ Newbigin 1994d: 81.

¹¹¹ Newbigin 1994d: 81.

disagreement between Newbigin and Kuhn. For whereas Kuhn is more sceptical about the question of whether from the newer vantage point, one can see points of rational continuity when looking back at the past, Newbigin parts company with him at this point. Though he agrees with Kuhn in rejecting the idea that there is any sense of rational continuity between unbelief and belief, he is much more prepared to argue for what we might call a 'continuity with hindsight'. This understanding is first introduced in Newbigin's 1979 article 'The Centrality of Jesus for History' (quoted above) but becomes clearest in passages in his book *Foolishness to the Greeks* where he explores the relationship between faith and rationality in some detail. At one point in his discussion of Kuhn for example, he writes:

My point here is simply this: while there is radical discontinuity in the sense that the new theory is not reached by any process of logical reasoning from the old, *there is also a continuity in the sense that the old can be rationally understood from the point of view of the new.* . . . Thus, to recognize a radical discontinuity between the old and the new is not to surrender to irrationality. Seen from one side there is only a chasm; seen from the other there is a bridge.¹¹²

From the vantage point of faith, therefore, the steps by which one arrived at the initial point of belief become clearer, but this only becomes a possibility once the 'arena' of faith has been entered. Thus, Newbigin's views about conversion find parallels with Kuhn's views about 'paradigm shifts', but a distinction emerges in that Newbigin is not as thorough-going in his views about the incommensurability of paradigms as is Kuhn. Rationality for him works

¹¹² Newbigin 1986b: 52 (emphasis added). Cf. also the statements (in Newbigin 1979a: 208) that: 'it is necessary and proper to speak of a radical discontinuity between that perspective in which Jesus is perceived as enemy and that in which he is perceived as Lord'; and, in discussing the 'continuity' of the of God disciples' faith between their pre- and post-resurrection experience, that: 'Certainly there is a continuity, but it is a continuity perceived from the new perspective and not otherwise.'

‘backwards’ (from the vantage point of faith) rather than ‘forwards’ (from the vantage point of unbelief).

Crucially, this concept of ‘continuity in hindsight’ is developed by Newbigin as his defence against the claim that such talk of faith is ‘irrational’. For, in contrast to the former way of ‘seeing’ things, faith offers what he calls ‘a wider and more inclusive rationality than the older one could.’¹¹³ Similarly, in a passage in which he refers to the vantage point of faith as ‘that other way’, he writes:

The Christian claim is that, though that other way of understanding the world can in no way be reached by any logical step from the axioms of this one, nevertheless that other way does offer a wider rationality that embraces and does not contradict the rationality of this.¹¹⁴

In a later summary statement, he expresses this same thought in the following way: ‘There is an asymmetry in this relationship, as between the paradigms of science, but not a total discontinuity. From one side the other looks quite irrational, but from the other side there is a rationality that embraces both.’¹¹⁵

Despite Newbigin’s claim that his modified Kuhnian view constitutes a defence against the charge of irrationality, therefore, it is important to note that this defence (once more) only works from the vantage point of faith. It does not help to construct a bridge from the realm of unbelief, for it cannot envisage one. From this vantage point he says, ‘there is only a chasm’.¹¹⁶

At the point of *initial* engagement with unbelief therefore Newbigin appeals to the idea that it is the acceptance of the priority of ‘revelation’ which

¹¹³ Newbigin 1986b: 53.

¹¹⁴ Newbigin 1986b: 54.

¹¹⁵ Newbigin 1986b: 63.

¹¹⁶ Newbigin 1986b: 52.

constitutes the starting point for discovery. Notice, for example, the very specific language he uses when he writes that:

The twin dogmas of Incarnation and Trinity thus form the starting point for a way of understanding reality as a whole, a way that leads out into a wider and more inclusive rationality than the real but limited rationality of the reductionist views that try to explain the whole of reality in terms of the natural sciences from physics to biology, a wider rationality that in no way negates but acknowledges and includes these other kinds of explanations as proper and necessary at their respective levels.¹¹⁷

Once more, we return to the apologetic problems that arise out of a strong sense of the incommensurability of the domains of ‘faith’ and ‘unbelief’.

In conclusion, therefore, it is hard to see how Newbigin *can* be anything other than a fideist, given the fact that his only defence against ‘irrationality’ is an argument that only works with the hindsight of faith; particularly when the prerequisites for faith and understanding according to Newbigin are the ‘dogmas’ of Incarnation and Trinity which no pre-Christian ‘rationality’ could hope to comprehend.

4.3.5 Tensions and questions

A number of tensions therefore arise within Newbigin’s views about the ideas of ‘paradigm shifts’, ‘incommensurability’, and ‘conversion’ which are heightened by the tendency to polarise the respective modalities of ‘faith’ and ‘rationality’. Two particular points may be noted at this point.

In the first place, Newbigin’s use of the term ‘paradigm shift’ to refer to ‘conversion’ from unbelief to belief can be said to imply a stronger sense of

¹¹⁷ Newbigin 1986b: 90 (emphasis added).

‘incommensurability’ than was intended by Kuhn himself. Critics of his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* thought Kuhn was denying the ‘rational’ element in the process of change and was arguing that decisions about paradigms were based purely upon sociological and psychological factors rather than those of ‘logic’ and ‘reason’. One of his foremost critics, Imre Lakatos, argued that for Kuhn there are ‘no super-paradigmatic standards’, and that therefore ‘(t)here are no rational standards for their comparison’. He concluded that: ‘. . . in Kuhn’s view scientific revolution is irrational, a matter for mob psychology’.¹¹⁸

As a result of this sort of critique, Kuhn was later to modify his views somewhat – or at least to reformulate the way in which he had earlier expressed his convictions. On the one hand, he ‘categorically’ rejected the charges of ‘irrationalism’, ‘relativism’ or ‘mob rule’, arguing that:

To say that, in matters of theory-choice, the force of logic and observation cannot in principle be compelling is neither to discard logic and observation nor to suggest that there are not good reasons for favouring one theory over another.¹¹⁹

On the other hand, he did admit that his previous work might well have caused this misunderstanding and contributed to a stronger interpretation than was intended.¹²⁰

It was a weakness of my *Scientific Revolutions* that it could only name, not analyse, the phenomenon it repeatedly referred to as ‘partial communication’. But partial communication was never . . . ‘complete [mutual] incomprehension’. . . . It named a problem to be worked on, not elevated to inscrutability.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Lakatos 1970: 178 (emphasis original).

¹¹⁹ Kuhn 1970b: 234.

¹²⁰ Kuhn 1970b: 259-60.

¹²¹ Kuhn 1970b: 250. Kuhn is quoting here from an article by Stephen Toulmin (Toulmin 1970: 43), and adds the word ‘mutual’ to clarify Toulmin’s point.

In subsequently reconstructing what he meant by ‘partial communication’, Kuhn effectively affirmed the ‘rationality’ of aspects of theory choice along the lines of their agreement with notions of ‘accuracy’, ‘consistency’, ‘scope’, ‘simplicity’, and ‘fruitfulness’.¹²² To this extent, therefore, Kuhn admits that his original formulations were somewhat imprecise, and actually envisaged a more ‘logical’ and ‘rational’ element in the process of ‘paradigm choice’ than they had appeared to suggest.¹²³

Our point here is that whatever development and reconstruction may be apparent in Kuhn’s own later work, it is the original ‘hard’ interpretation of commensurability that is reflected in Newbigin’s discussions. In the light of this analysis, one wonders whether a greater measure of openness to the question of the role of rationality in ‘conversion’ might not have benefited Newbigin’s discussions, opening up – as they do – the question of whether the commensurability he envisages ‘in hindsight’ (between the rationality of faith and unbelief) could not *also* in some measure be seen to work the other way around.

Secondly, in addition to the philosophical problems associated with an over-definite distinction between competing paradigms, there are also historical dimensions which likewise suggest that a less ‘rigid’ approach to the progression between one paradigm and another is a more accurate reflection of reality.

Alasdair MacIntyre’s response to Kuhn’s book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* for example, led him to a more nuanced conclusion than Newbigin

¹²² Kuhn 1977: 321-2.

¹²³ See the article by Masterman (1970), who notes twenty-one different ways in which Kuhn uses the term ‘paradigm’ in Kuhn 1970c; also Kuhn’s response (1977: 293-319). In this context, see also the discussion of the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ elements in Kuhn’s theory choice in Lamb 1989: 67ff..

about the nature of such paradigm shifts. In a 1977 article, MacIntyre argued that the supposed incommensurability between succeeding traditions can be shown to rest on less watertight foundations than is often supposed. In the first place, he demonstrates from the case of René Descartes himself that whilst Descartes believed himself to be operating within an ‘epistemological vacuum’ when he arrived at his formula *Cogito ergo sum*, in reality he was working within the context of what MacIntyre calls a ‘narrative history’, in which inherent contingencies and continuities between present and past were taken for granted and remained continuously in operation. As a result – though Descartes chose not to acknowledge the fact – his ‘discoveries’ were not made in the kind of vacuum that he supposed, but depended upon the history of the tradition (both in terms of thought and language) of which he was himself an integral part.¹²⁴

MacIntyre argues that precisely these elements of ongoing biographical experience were highly significant in bringing him to the conclusions for which he was to become famous.

The resulting thrust of MacIntyre’s article is that Thomas Kuhn himself came to conceptualise the nature of scientific revolutions in much the same way as Descartes conceived the resolution of his own epistemological crisis. Both thought that such revolutions take place in an epistemological and cultural vacuum: everything being brought to a crisis in which a new resolution is achieved which has no inherent connection with that which went before. In this process – as MacIntyre describes it: ‘Everything is put in question simultaneously. There is no rational continuity between the situation at the time

¹²⁴ MacIntyre 1977: esp. 455-8.

immediately preceding the crisis and any situation following it.’¹²⁵ But MacIntyre argues that this is a fallacy. Descartes did not achieve ‘total’ doubt in the sense that all other facets of experience were eliminated, but was dependent upon the tradition of which he was a part in the very process of articulating those doubts. Likewise, he argues, Kuhn is wrong to argue for the ‘total’ collapse of paradigms. On the contrary:

Just as Descartes’s account of his own epistemological crisis was only possible by reason of Descartes’s ability to recount his own history, indeed to live his life as a narrative about to be cast into a history – an ability which Descartes himself could not recognise without falsifying his own account of epistemological crises – so Kuhn . . . recount(s) the history of epistemological crises as moments of almost total discontinuity without noticing the historical continuity which makes their own intelligible narratives possible.¹²⁶

By way of contrast, argues MacIntyre, ‘What is carried over from one paradigm to another are epistemological ideals and a correlative understanding of what constitutes the progress of a single intellectual life.’¹²⁷

In a similar way to that of Kuhn, Newbigin’s approach also effectively undervalues the continuity between successive historical paradigms. As we have seen, in the context of his discussions about conversion this means that any explanation of the ‘rationality’ of faith can *only* be mounted on the basis that it is a ‘rationality’ that is fundamentally distinct from the kind of ‘rationality’ that preceded it. In effect, this move further distances the operating sphere of ‘faith’ from that of ‘reason’ in Newbigin’s thought.

¹²⁵ MacIntyre 1977: 466.

¹²⁶ MacIntyre 1977: 467-8.

¹²⁷ MacIntyre 1977: 467.

4.4 Newbigin, Polanyi and the reconstruction of apologetics

We have been developing the argument that Newbigin's indebtedness to a Polanyian framework effectively limits the apologetic avenues down which he can proceed. More specifically, we have argued that the adoption of such a framework tends to set up obstacles in the way of constructing an engaging apologetic in a secularised context – other than by means of some form of 'fideism'. It is to a more specific consideration of Newbigin's apologetic strategies therefore that we now turn. We shall first examine their presuppositional foundations, and then proceed to a critical examination of Newbigin's specific proposal that the gospel represents 'public truth'.

4.4.1 Apologetic foundations

Newbigin's understanding of the nature of apologetics is determined by the principles which have been explored hitherto. His exposition of the contemporary cultural malaise has clearly laid the blame firmly within the 'Cartesian' camp. As a result, he says, we live in a culture that seeks 'indubitable certainties upon which could be founded a structure of knowledge formulated with the clarity of mathematics.'¹²⁸ Accordingly, the Church finds itself in a dilemma. Does it seek to commend its message on the basis of the surrounding culture's assumptions (its 'reigning plausibility structure'), or does it seek some other way? In his subsequent reconstruction of the apologetic enterprise, it is not surprising to find Newbigin commending 'some other way' as a direct rebuttal of

¹²⁸ Newbigin 1988c: 159.

the former path. In this context he argues that:

The typical apologetic for Christianity in our Western culture has been one that attempts to ‘explain’ it in the terms of our culture, to show that it is ‘reasonable’ in terms of our ultimate beliefs about how things really are.¹²⁹

But this concession to a ‘Cartesianism’ which has sought to commend the gospel in terms of its inherent ‘reasonableness’ has plagued the Church for too long, argues Newbigin.¹³⁰ He traces its methodological approach back to the impact of the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the attempt by Descartes to bolster and defend the Christian faith against the growing scepticism of the times.¹³¹ But further back than this, he compares it with the work of Thomas Aquinas and his attempt in the *Summa Theologica* to offer proofs for the existence of God which rested on grounds of reason rather than those of revelation. ‘Consider what Aquinas does’, he argues:

In the first part of his great work he sets out to demonstrate by rational proofs the existence of God, and he does so without reference to Jesus Christ. Then in the third part he says that we know God through Jesus Christ. I realize, of course, that Aquinas is more nuanced than that, but we see in Aquinas what a great shift has occurred from Augustine’s ‘I believe in order to know’ to Aristotelian philosophy, which is not dependent on faith. This I believe has been the fatal flaw of apologetics in the last 300 years.¹³²

Newbigin’s response to this appraisal leads him to an exposition of the nature of apologetics that is specifically grounded in the revelation of the gospel itself rather than in the supposedly ‘independent’ authority of reason as envisaged by Aquinas. This move serves to underline the contrast between the gospel as

¹²⁹ Newbigin 1986b: 21-2.

¹³⁰ E.g., Newbigin 1988c: 164; 1995d: 93f..

¹³¹ Newbigin 1992k: 22. For a wider discussion of the background to Descartes’ work in the theological and social chaos of the Thirty Years’ War, see e.g., Toulmin 1990: 70-71.

¹³² Newbigin 1992k: 22.

‘revelation’ and the question of its accessibility via the operation of human reason. There are two dimensions to this articulation.

Firstly, Newbigin argues that the gospel is itself to be understood as inherently *un*-reasonable. After all, when the message about a ‘universal’ gospel is said to revolve around a man crucified on a cross, it is clearly the case that: ‘No amount of brilliant argument can make it sound reasonable to the inhabitants of the reigning plausibility structure.’¹³³ In his 1995 book *Proper Confidence*, he writes in a similar vein:

The affirmation that the One by whom and through whom and for whom all creation exists is to be identified with a man who was crucified and rose bodily from the dead cannot possibly be accommodated within any plausibility structure except one of which it is the cornerstone.¹³⁴

Secondly, therefore, he argues that revelation must itself constitute the *foundation* of any theological and apologetic construction, rather than take the form of a later ‘conclusion’ reached by some other route. The resulting affirmation of the revelation of the gospel as the only conceivable ‘*a priori*’ represents for Newbigin both a thorough reversal of the Enlightenment project’s cultural displacement of revelation by reason, and constitutes – to his way of thinking – an appropriate and proper outworking of Augustine’s alternative methodological approach that posits ‘faith’ as the prerequisite to ‘understanding’.¹³⁵

This ‘revelational’ methodology is supported by Newbigin at various points in his writings in terms of a ‘defence’, a ‘confession’, and an ‘outworking’.

¹³³ Newbigin 1989f: 232.

¹³⁴ Newbigin 1995d: 93.

¹³⁵ E.g., Newbigin 1983b: 23-4, 63; 1988e: 103; 1989f: 48; 1990s: 6; 1994d: 69, 84.

Firstly, the methodological ‘defence’ takes the form of an argument that no sufficient grounds can be found for defending the gospel *except those offered by the gospel itself*. As he puts it: ‘Every claim to show grounds for believing the gospel which lie outside the gospel itself can be shown to rest ultimately on faith-commitments which can be questioned.’¹³⁶ In other words, whenever the gospel is defended on grounds of its supposedly inherent ‘reasonableness’, the prior faith-commitment being exhibited by such a belief is that of ‘Enlightenment’ rationalism rather than that of biblical faith. Indeed, as he puts it in *Proper Confidence*: ‘To look outside of the gospel for a starting point for the demonstration of the reasonableness of the gospel is itself a contradiction of the gospel, for it implies that we look for the *logos* elsewhere than in Jesus.’¹³⁷

Secondly, as a result of this fact, the only possible ‘defence’ of the faith that Newbigin brings forward in the arena of apologetics is simply the articulation of a personal faith formulated in the language of ‘confession’. So he writes:

I am – in Pascal’s famous phrase – wagering my life on the faith that Jesus is the ultimate authority. My answer is a confession: I believe. It is a personal commitment to a faith that cannot be demonstrated on grounds established from the point of view of another commitment.¹³⁸

After all, he argues, we are dealing not with impersonal statements which can be reasoned and investigated. Rather, we are dealing with a personal God who reveals himself in personal encounter to those who listen to Him. So he writes in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* that:

¹³⁶ Newbigin 1993f: 236.

¹³⁷ Newbigin 1995d: 94.

¹³⁸ Newbigin 1995c: 15.

That truly personal knowledge only becomes a possibility when I abandon the sovereign claim of autonomous reason, the claim to know the other person without that person's self-communication in speech and act and gesture; when I am ready to stop my investigations and listen, to be addressed, to be called in question, to be summoned to an adventure of trust.¹³⁹

At the heart of the apologetic task therefore, he argues, is the obligation to speak not on the basis of some external 'rational' authority which seeks to establish the truth of the gospel from *outside of itself*, but rather on the basis of the gospel's *own* framework of divine self-revelation.

This leads him thirdly to make points about the practical 'outworking' of apologetics. Frustratingly, Newbigin never develops the practical aspects of his programme in any great detail, preferring rather to lay out the presuppositional framework. Nonetheless the parameters within which such applications are to be made are more or less clear. For example, we quoted earlier his statement in *Proper Confidence* that to seek for a 'starting point' for apologetics on any other grounds than those of revelation 'implies that we look for the *logos* elsewhere than in Jesus.'¹⁴⁰ Directly following this statement, Newbigin concludes as follows:

The obvious implication of this argument, therefore, is that the proper form of apologetics is the preaching of the gospel itself and the demonstration – which is not merely or primarily a matter of words – that it does provide the best foundation for a way of grasping and dealing with the mystery of our existence in this universe.¹⁴¹

Given the supporting structure examined in the previous sections, it is perhaps not surprising that Newbigin's primary apologetic strategy is to rely upon what he terms as 'demonstration' (the congregation as the 'hermeneutic' of the

¹³⁹ Newbigin 1989f: 61-2.

¹⁴⁰ Newbigin 1995d: 94.

¹⁴¹ Newbigin 1995d: 94.

gospel) rather than specific verbal ‘argument’; nor is it surprising that the ‘verbal’ content of apologetics – so far as it is envisaged – is described by him as ‘preaching’.¹⁴²

Two further points may also be made. Firstly, the ‘demonstrative’ dimension can be traced once more to the Polanyian notion of ‘heuristic passion’, in which an idea’s truthfulness is ‘demonstrated’ by its ability to deal with reality in terms of future ‘integrations’ of this reality, rather than by a specific verbal engagement at the point of dispute. In this sense the context of ‘proof’ – inasmuch as it exists in Newbigin’s thought – functions in a future dimension rather than a present one. He argues quite specifically for example, in a response to Marius Felderhof’s critique of *The Other Side of 1984*, that it is his understanding of Polanyi that has led him to this conviction. Felderhof, he argues, ‘tries to equate Polanyi’s “fiduciary framework” with Wolterstorff’s “ultimate certitudes”, but this is totally to misunderstand Polanyi’.¹⁴³ By contrast, Newbigin insists that:

[Polanyi’s] ‘fiduciary framework’ is not an ultimate certitude, but a necessary starting point for exploration. Ultimate certitude is an eschatological concept! Hence the necessary character of real dialogue which involves precisely the kind of ambiguity for which Marius faults me. The idea that there can be some kind of knowledge which finally overcomes the divisions between human beings this side of the End is a utopian illusion which I do not share.¹⁴⁴

Secondly, significant in this context is the emerging influence of Barth’s theology upon Newbigin’s ideas which becomes clearest in his discussions of

¹⁴² Cf. also, Newbigin 1986b: 128; 1989f: 158-9; 1993f: 243; 1995c: 150. Though he does not quote it directly, Newbigin would undoubtedly have agreed with Alasdair MacIntyre’s early statement, that: ‘Belief cannot reason with unbelief: it can only preach to it’ (MacIntyre 1957: 211).

¹⁴³ Newbigin 1985d: 34.

¹⁴⁴ Newbigin 1985d: 34.

apologetics.¹⁴⁵ Whilst Barth's influence is not nearly as pervasive as Polanyi's, it nonetheless can be seen to coalesce with a Polanyian concept of 'fiduciary commitments' as understood by Newbigin, and emerges in Newbigin's thought in two ways.

In the first place, Newbigin begins from the mid-1980s to express more forcefully his own rejection of the value of what he calls 'natural theology' in the apologetic enterprise. This phrase first appears in his 1986 book *Foolishness to the Greeks*¹⁴⁶ and is specifically connected to Barth's theology in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Here Newbigin argues that: 'Natural theology . . . is in no way a step on the way toward the theology which takes God's self-revelation as its starting point. It is more likely, in fact, to lead in the opposite direction.'¹⁴⁷ He continues by quoting Barth's discussion of the 'self-revelation' of God as the sole

¹⁴⁵ Newbigin's earliest contact with Barth's writings came whilst he was a theological student at Cambridge in the 1930s, when he found his material on the atonement 'incomprehensible' (Newbigin 1993g: 29). Hereafter, his views about the Swiss theologian became more favourable. He first met him personally in Holland in August 1948 when both were preparing for the Amsterdam conference of that year (1993g: 109: 'It was a brief meeting and I had not yet learned to appreciate either Barth or this theology as I was to do later'). He later heard him address the Amsterdam assembly itself, and thought he was 'magnificent' (1993g: 110). Then in the 1950s he shared membership with Barth of a WCC preparatory group for its Second World Assembly (1993g: 123ff.), and had a further meeting with him in Strasbourg in 1960 (1993g: 164). These contacts paved the way for a more favourable reaction to his writings in the coming years (note e.g., his approval of Barth's attack on 'religion' in 1966: 9-10), and for his eventual reading of the *Church Dogmatics* in the summer months of 1974 following his journey back from India (1993g: 228-9). Here he writes: 'For the three summer months we lived in beloved Edinburgh and there was leisure for reading. I decided to do what I had not previously attempted: to read the whole of Barth's *Dogmatics*. It was an immensely rewarding experience. Barth condensed and Barth quoted I had found totally unimpressive. But the real Barth, and especially the famous small-print notes, was enthralling. It was a needed preparation for the much more difficult missionary experience which (as I did not then realize) lay ahead.'

¹⁴⁶ Newbigin 1986b: 88 ('it would also be idle to suppose that we could come to the knowledge of a supernatural personal reality by induction from all the data of our natural experience. . . . Natural theology ends here; another kind of enterprise begins, and another kind of language has to be used - the language of testimony').

¹⁴⁷ Newbigin 1989f: 61-2. Note too in this context his discussions of Barth's view of 'religion' as unbelief (1982c: 13; 1988h: 327; 1989b: 329).

means whereby humanity can come to know God.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, in a 1994 essay Newbigin writes of the absurdity of the approach to the knowledge of the divine which says in effect:

If God really exists, is there not something ridiculous about one of God's creatures saying to him, 'I can demonstrate your existence without relying on what you tell me about yourself'? And is it not even more absurd for this creature to regard his own alleged proofs as the necessary basis for his attention to the divine revelation? Yet how otherwise can we regard the long tradition of 'natural theology' seen as the necessary prolegomena for the study of God's self-revelation in Christ as witnessed in scripture?¹⁴⁹

He later concludes that, 'In this context one can understand Barth's passionate attack on natural theology.'¹⁵⁰

Secondly, in connection with this rejection of 'natural theology' is Newbigin's sympathy for Barth's views about revelation as the only presupposition of faith.¹⁵¹ The attractiveness of Barth's views at this point for Newbigin becomes more apparent from the late 1970s,¹⁵² particularly in terms of

¹⁴⁸ Barth 1960: 399. Hunsberger's discussion of the relationship between the theology of Barth and Newbigin needs reassessment at this point. His statement, for example, that 'Newbigin's allowance that there is a kind of continuity between the religious life of the world's peoples and the revelation in Jesus Christ moves in a direction which Barth could not' needs careful weighing. Whilst Newbigin does attack Barth's views about the 'historicity' of religious experience in his earlier work (so Hunsberger 1998a: 212), his later work (after reading the *Dogmatics* in 1974) is characterised by a much more positive appreciation of Barth. After this time, the phrase 'natural theology' appears some forty-five times in Newbigin's work, and in all of these instances it carries a negative connotation (see esp. 1994d (largely reproduced as 1996c); and 1995d: e.g., 100 where he describes his own position as one that 'will be criticized by natural theology'). It appears that Newbigin's reaction against the rationalism of the Enlightenment led him in a more Barthian direction than was the case before 1974. In the light of this later material, Hunsberger's conclusion that Barth's response ('Nein!') to Brunner (Barth and Brunner 1946) 'rules out his companionship with Newbigin's approach' needs to be revised. To be sure, we have brought out Newbigin's view that commensurability works 'in hindsight', but in the terms that Barth sets out (that there is no possibility of moving from 'natural theology' to revelation), Newbigin would have been in complete agreement with him.

¹⁴⁹ Newbigin 1994d: 62.

¹⁵⁰ Newbigin 1994d: 67.

¹⁵¹ Newbigin approvingly uses the phrase 'the very word of the living God' to describe Barth's position on revelation (1992g: 78).

¹⁵² E.g., Newbigin 1979b: 304-7; 1979a: 201-2; 1980c: 3, 6; 1982c: 13; 1989f: 62; 1992k: 22-3; 1994d: 66, 86; 1996c: 14.

Barth's emphasis upon the Christological focus of such revelation. This can be illustrated, for example, by quoting from two 1979 articles which were sparked by the controversy surrounding the publication of *The Myth of God Incarnate*.¹⁵³

In the first article, in which Newbigin responds to the debate about the nature of epistemological 'starting points' that the book had provoked in English theology, he argues that:

Either one can take the general religious experience of mankind as the clue for our understanding of the human situation, and then seek categories with which to fit Jesus into this understanding; or one can take Jesus as the absolutely crucial and determinative clue for all understanding and then try to understand the rest of human experience from this centre. This, of course, is the issue which Karl Barth pressed relentlessly in all his writing.¹⁵⁴

In the second article (a contribution to the follow-up volume to the original collection of essays), Newbigin proceeds to defend Barth's statement that the theologian 'must answer directly and without qualification, without being ashamed of his naivety, that Jesus Christ is the one and entire truth through which he is shown how to think and speak.'¹⁵⁵ One suspects that when Newbigin commented in his autobiography that his reading of Barth's *Dogmatics* in the summer of 1974 was 'a needed preparation for the much more difficult missionary experience which . . . lay ahead,'¹⁵⁶ it was in the theological defence of the notion of God's self-revelation in Christ as an *a priori* that Barth's theology was most helpful to him.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Hick 1977.

¹⁵⁴ Newbigin 1979b: 303-4.

¹⁵⁵ Newbigin 1979a: 201, quoting Busch 1976: 435. (Busch is quoting from Barth's article, 'Philosophie und Theologie', in G. Huber (ed.), *Philosophie und Christliche Existenz: Festschrift für Heinrich Barth*, Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1960: 93f.) For Newbigin's further commendations of Barth's position on this point cf., 1989f: 62, 74, 98; 1992k: 22-23; 1996c: 14.

¹⁵⁶ Newbigin 1993g: 229.

¹⁵⁷ See e.g., Newbigin 1992k: 23.

4.4.2 Apologetics and ‘public truth’

Hitherto, we have explored the apologetic dimensions of Newbigin’s thought in relation to its foundational principles. We now turn to an examination of his statements about the gospel as ‘public truth’. Here the questions about ‘apologetic engagement’ raised before in relation to Polanyi, Kuhn (and Barth for that matter) become acute. Whereas, for example, Polanyi’s ‘theology’ could – in terms of his own descriptions of it – be labelled as ‘escapist’ in its departure from the ‘real’ world of politics and human affairs,¹⁵⁸ Newbigin’s intended thrust is wholly ‘engaging’ – whether in its affirmation of the gospel as ‘public truth’, or in his hope for a ‘Christian society’, or in his affirmation that Christianity is a religion ‘for the marketplace’.¹⁵⁹ But in order for this approach to be apologetically coherent, Newbigin has to escape the challenge that his method too involves a ‘leap’ of faith before the new paradigm of rationality can take effect. He has to show that Christian faith is defensible in the ‘public’ square in a way that properly engages secular objections and questions. The reason for the tension that Polanyi’s framework (confirmed by Kuhn) creates for Newbigin is that no criteria can be put forward whereby the disinterested outsider or secular opponent can recognise (and therefore ‘own’) the ‘public’ truthfulness of the gospel in any terms other than those defined by a *preceding* belief in the gospel itself.¹⁶⁰ Newbigin is reticent in setting any such criteria forward, but it is not altogether clear how he *could* set any criteria given the premises upon which he

¹⁵⁸ See above, section 4.3.1. Ronald Hall argues that the logical conclusion to be drawn from Polanyi’s theory of religion in its integration of religious meaning as the projections of the human imagination is that it ‘tends to turn religion into an abstraction’ (Hall 1982: 16).

¹⁵⁹ See the titles of Newbigin 1991a (‘Christianity as Public Truth’), Newbigin 1995b (‘A Christian Society?’), or Newbigin 1990n (‘Religion for the Marketplace’).

¹⁶⁰ Cf. e.g., Newbigin 1995d: 94; also 1996b: 7.

builds his framework.

Attention has been drawn by others to the problems relating to the viability of this concept within Newbigin's overall perspective,¹⁶¹ but the roots of this tension have not before been traced to Newbigin's indebtedness to the work Polanyi and Kuhn. As will be evident from the discussion thus far, it is the structure of thought inherent in this material that leads inevitably to the impasse. We shall therefore explore some central dimensions of this difficulty as it applies to Newbigin's statements about Christian faith in the public sphere.

Newbigin first introduces the concept of 'public truth' in his book *The Other Side of 1984* in the context of a discussion of Polanyi's arguments in favour of what the latter calls a 'post-critical' philosophy. Here Newbigin writes that:

... if the immense achievements of autonomous reason seem to have produced a world which is at best meaningless and at worst full of demons, then it could be that Polanyi is right, that we shall not find renewal within the framework of the assumptions which the Enlightenment held to be 'self-evident', that there is needed a radical conversion, a new starting point which begins as an act of trust in divine grace as something simply given to be received in faith and gratitude.¹⁶²

We note immediately that what Newbigin refers to as a 'new starting point' is firmly contrasted with what is culturally acceptable as 'public truth'. Newbigin proceeds to describe this contrast in terms of post-Enlightenment culture's approach to the question of Christian faith. 'Our culture', he argues, 'has acknowledged and protected the right of individuals to hold this faith as a private option. But it has drawn a sharp distinction between this private option

¹⁶¹ E.g., Thomas 1984: 319f.; Solomon 1985; Williams 1993; Netland 1994; Hoedemaker 1998: 43ff..

¹⁶² Newbigin 1983b: 25.

and the principles which govern public life.’ He continues (using the actual phrase ‘public truth’ for the first time):

These principles belong to the realm of ‘public truth’, that is to say to the area which is governed by the truths which are either held to be self-evident or can be shown to be true to any person who is willing to consider all the evidence.¹⁶³

We shall return to this significant statement in due course, but continue for the moment to follow Newbigin’s argument to its conclusion. He continues characteristically by critiquing the Enlightenment’s supposed objectivity. After all, post-Enlightenment culture has *itself* accepted the ‘truth’ of certain ideas which are not strictly self-evident. He cites as examples the belief in the idea that human reason and conscience are autonomous; the belief that everyone has the right to ‘happiness’ (and that the nation-State should secure these rights); and – most significantly – the belief that modern science is the only means of comprehending the world in which we live.¹⁶⁴ These are ideas – he argues – that have been held ‘in faith’. Newbigin’s point is that the beliefs that Christians hold – which within a post-Enlightenment culture have been restricted to the ‘private’ sphere of home and family – must now be brought into the public domain and offered as the foundation for the renewal of our culture. He describes this central proposal in the following terms:

What is now being proposed is that not just in the private world but also in the public world another model for understanding is needed; that this in turn requires the acknowledgment that our most fundamental beliefs cannot be demonstrated but are held by faith; that it is the responsibility of the Church to offer this new model for understanding as the basis for a radical renewal of our culture; and that without such radical renewal our culture has no future. This is – if one may put it very sharply – an invitation to recover a proper acknowledgment of the role of dogma.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Newbigin 1983b: 26.

¹⁶⁴ Newbigin 1983b: 26-7.

¹⁶⁵ Newbigin 1983b: 27.

In these passages, the main lines of Newbigin's understanding of the concept of 'public truth' are set out. Firstly, the connection that Newbigin draws between acceptance of the new cultural 'starting point' and the need for 'faith' (or 'trust') is very close. What this connection suggests is that his understanding of what would be involved in the 'conversion' of our culture is logically consistent with his understanding of what is involved in conversion at the individual level. In a parallel manner therefore, his argument is that if post-Enlightenment culture is to begin to build from this new 'starting point', then it must acknowledge the acceptance of this starting point 'as an act of trust in divine grace as something simply given to be received in faith and gratitude.'¹⁶⁶ Similarly, just as in the personal sphere, entry into the realm of faith involves the acceptance of what he describes as, 'The twin dogmas of Incarnation and Trinity',¹⁶⁷ so also in the realm of public affairs the affirmation of this new start is dependent upon the acceptance of certain 'dogmatic' presuppositions. As he puts it, this constitutes in effect, 'an invitation to recover a proper acknowledgment of the role of dogma.'¹⁶⁸

The central problem with Newbigin's material at this point is that he never explicates nor defends a philosophical justification for the notion of 'public truth'. The result is that it is never quite clear as to what precisely he means by it. We shall therefore proceed first by giving an overview of the usage of the phrase 'public truth' in Newbigin's writings, and proceed to identify a central tension within it. We shall then return to the material in *The Other Side of 1984* in order to trace the 'fault-lines' of this tension. Finally, we shall draw some conclusions

¹⁶⁶ Newbigin 1983b: 25.

¹⁶⁷ E.g., Newbigin 1986b: 90 (also 103, 133). Cf. also 1983b: 63.

¹⁶⁸ Newbigin 1983b: 27.

about the implications of these observations for Newbigin's thought more generally.

(i) The meaning of 'public truth'

Newbigin employs the term 'public truth' a total of 126 times in his writings, introducing it in the passage quoted above from his 1983 book *The Other Side of 1984*. An examination of these instances shows that there are three broad categories in which he uses the phrase.

'Epistemological'

Firstly, he uses the concept of 'public truth' in the context of his ongoing 'epistemological' discussions which highlight the contrast within Western culture between the general acceptance of certain 'facts' as 'public truth' on the one hand, and a general dismissal of the gospel as simply 'private opinion' on the other. This deployment, which is his most common usage,¹⁶⁹ frequently occurs in contexts in which Newbigin develops the familiar argument – discussed in chapter 2 – about the post-Enlightenment dichotomy between 'facts' and 'values'.¹⁷⁰ This appeal (addressed to society at large) therefore calls attention to what he perceives to be an epistemological inconsistency, and advocates the acknowledgement of the gospel as 'public truth'. As such it serves to underline

¹⁶⁹ This usage occurs fifty-six times in all: 1983b: 26; 1985f: 176 (x3), 177; 1986b: 38 (x2); 1987d: 124 (x2); 1988g: 152 (x2); 1988f: 193; 1988c: 166 (x2), 173; 1988e: 101, 103 (x2), 105; 1989a: 2; 1989g: 3 (x2); 1989f: 4, 5, 23, 24, 35, 40, 223; 1990s: 7; 1990m: 139 (x2); 1991f: 5, 12, 13, 24, 53; 1992b: 2 (x2); 1992e: 1 (x2); 1994a: 128; 1995d: 37 (x2), 38 (x2); 1995d: 50; 1997c: 3; 1997d: 5 (x2); 1998: 138; 1998: 141, 142 (x3), 151.

¹⁷⁰ E.g., his assertion that, 'statements about human life being governed by the DNA molecule are facts, part of public truth. But statements about the purpose of human life being to glorify God and enjoy him forever are not facts; they are private opinion' Newbigin 1988e: 103.

his argument that such an epistemological dichotomy must be a false one, needing to be ‘publicly’ reformulated more satisfactorily so that the epistemic truth-status of religious faith can again be recognised.

The ‘status’ of the resulting truth claims is not directly defined in relation to those of science in the public sphere. But occasionally in contrasting these two perspectives, Newbigin does appear to advance the logic of the contrast by advocating that the gospel *should* be accepted as ‘public truth’ in a sense strictly analogous to the way in which ‘facts’ are acknowledged. In other words, the gospel’s truth claims rank alongside scientific statements and ought to be acknowledged in the same way. So, for example, in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* he refers to the public estimation of theologians in the following manner:

A very large section of society simply dismisses the statements of theologians as expressions of personal opinion – opinion which they are entitled to hold but which does not rank as public truth, as factual knowledge in the sense that the statements of physicists do.¹⁷¹

This broad appeal for an epistemological consistency within Western culture, and his consequent plea for the ‘public’ consideration of religious truth claims, is set alongside two further uses.

‘Dialogical’

The second use of the concept of ‘public truth’ arises out of the first. Here, the conviction that the gospel is true is expanded by Newbigin’s commitment to the ‘dialogical’ aspect of faith, and his use of the phrase ‘public truth’ in this further context. One can illustrate this from his 1992 ‘Conference

¹⁷¹ Newbigin 1989f: 40. Also 1988g: 152.

Call' paper issued prior to the Swanwick 'Gospel and Our Culture' conference of July that year. Here, Newbigin argues for the 'public truth' of the gospel in the sense that it must be presented in the public realm for the purpose of 'dialogue'. In this context, the assertion that it is 'public' is to be distinguished from any suggestion that it becomes a dominating ideology. Rather, it is to be set forward in the public arena as a 'conversation partner' with other ideologies in the realm of public affairs. He writes accordingly that:

To affirm the Gospel as public truth is not to assert dominance but to invite dialogue. The announcement of things which have happened is not the fruit of dialogue but its starting point, for the meaning and implications of what is announced have to be learned in dialogue. For news of things that have happened we depend upon competent witness. Dialogue is not a substitute for reliable information. The first responsibility of the Church is to give faithful witness to the things that have happened. But this must lead on to dialogue, for the witnessing community does not know in advance what the message will entail, what will be the consequences of its acceptance in the several areas of human life.¹⁷²

The results of such engagement may as yet be unclear, argues Newbigin, but these will become apparent in due course as the gospel is publicly shared and debated. In this context (in line with Polanyi once more), Christian faith is seen as 'open-ended', searching for the kind of resolutions and integrations that it will produce amongst its adherents as they 'dialogue' – not only amongst themselves but also with others who are seeking to grapple with the issues raised in the wider context of society and culture. At these points, the word 'public' describes the *social* context in which Christian truth-claims are seen to operate, being contrasted hereby with its frequent confinement to the 'private' world. In

¹⁷² Newbigin 1992b: 2. This paper is reprinted in almost identical form as 1992e). Cf. also e.g., 1989f: 50.

addition it underlines on the other the fact that the gospel – by its very nature as truth – is to be set in the public arena in order to *engage* other viewpoints.¹⁷³

'Foundational'

Alongside these 'epistemological' and 'dialogical' perspectives, however, a much more 'foundational' meaning is also apparent within Newbigin's writings which sits in critical tension with them. In this third sense, the gospel is presented as 'public truth' not in the sense that it ought to be considered as on a par with scientific truth, nor simply as a 'dialogue partner' with rival viewpoints, but as the presuppositional basis upon which *every* cultural ideology will ultimately be judged. In these places the language used suggests not so much that the gospel maintains its 'truthfulness' in the public sphere amongst other ideologies, but the more radical contention that the gospel is itself *the* 'public truth' upon which all public *life* must properly be founded. Here, therefore, the use of the adjective 'public' means something like 'ultimate', 'final', or 'decisive'.

This perspective is usually developed by Newbigin within a more explicitly theological paradigm (using the religious language of eschatology appropriate to it). So, for example, Newbigin can state that: 'we proclaim [the gospel] as public truth in the sense that it is the truth by which all other claims to truth will finally be judged.'¹⁷⁴ Or elsewhere he can describe the gospel as 'public truth' in the sense that it is 'the touchstone by which all other claims for

¹⁷³ E.g., Newbigin 1989f: 50; 1991b: 9; 1992a: 2; 1992b: 2 (x2); 1992e: 1 (x2). Cf. our discussion of this aspect of 'dialogue' in chapter 2, and section 4.2.3 of the present chapter.

¹⁷⁴ Newbigin 1987d: 131.

truth have to be judged'.¹⁷⁵ Or finally, he can write that the 'the Church is the body entrusted with the responsibility of bearing witness to the fact that the one whom Jesus called Father is the Lord and will be the judge of all without exception. This is public truth.'¹⁷⁶

This theological paradigm is consequently developed by Newbigin in two directions. In the first of these, it is used in contexts where he specifically addresses the Church. For example, on occasions it is used as a 'wake up call' to the Church to recover her 'public' role.¹⁷⁷ The Church, he writes, 'has to claim the high ground of public truth', if she is to be faithful 'to a message which concerns the kingdom of God, his rule over all things and all peoples.'¹⁷⁸ She must 'affirm as public truth the real nature and destiny of man, that human life is to be lived in and for the love of God and the love of the neighbour whom God gives as his representative in every situation.'¹⁷⁹ This is usually expressed in terms that imply a general obligation upon Christians to engage with other viewpoints in the public arena, but it is also sometimes expressed in more specifically 'evangelistic' terms. So, for example, he can write that:

Specifically, as the command of Jesus tells us, [the gospel] is to be made known to all the nations, to all human communities of whatever race or creed or culture. It is public truth. We commend it to all people in the hope that, by the witness of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of others, it will come to be seen by them for themselves as the truth.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁵ Newbigin 1995a: 10.

¹⁷⁶ Newbigin 1992b: 2 (also 1992e: 2). Other examples of this usage include: 1987d: 131; 1992b: 1, 2; 1992e: 1 (x2); 1997d: 8; 1998: 153. Cf. also 1989f: 48; 1995a: 10; 1998: 140, where the 'foundation' idea is applied in a more general philosophical sense.

¹⁷⁷ E.g., Newbigin 1985f: 180; 1986b: 115, 117; 1988g: 153 (x2); 1988c: 162, 163, 166; 1989d: 2; 1989c: 2; 1989f: 222 (x3); 1992h: 188; 1995d: 39 (x2); 1997d: 8; 1998: 150.

¹⁷⁸ Newbigin 1989f: 222.

¹⁷⁹ Newbigin 1985f: 180. Cf. also, 1986b: 117; 1988g: 153; 1989d: 2.

¹⁸⁰ Newbigin 1989f: 50.

Similarly he asks elsewhere: ‘What would be required of a Church which acknowledged the obligation to seek here in Britain for a Christian society?’ His response is that one of the requisites for this ‘is that the Church becomes an evangelising community.’¹⁸¹ He continues that:

This is not just to take the obvious point that if the Gospel is truth it is public truth - which everyone ought to know and believe. It is to make the further and distinct point that the Gospel is only known to be true when it is experienced as the liberating power that it is. Evangelisation is the antidote to domestication.¹⁸²

But the term is also applied in this ‘foundational’ sense specifically to the wider ‘public’ and cultural realm of politics and economics. In this setting (in tension with the previous notion of ‘dialogue’) the ‘public truth’ of the gospel is now said to be the framework of ideas that is specifically to ‘govern’ public life. Accordingly he can write, for example, that:

At the heart of modernity is the assertion that human reason, apart from divine revelation, is capable of finding the truth and coping with the world. The contrary affirmation, namely that God has in fact revealed his nature and purpose, is tolerated as a private opinion but not if it is offered as public truth to govern the public worlds of education, politics, business, culture.¹⁸³

A commitment to the gospel in these terms is not simply an adherence to one ideology amongst many, nor – as Newbigin puts it elsewhere – ‘as an invitation to a private and personal decision’ but rather ‘as public truth which ought to be acknowledged as true for the whole of the life of society.’¹⁸⁴ The contrasting application of the term in both ‘dialogical’ and ‘foundational’ senses inevitably creates a resulting ambiguity at the heart of Newbigin’s articulation of

¹⁸¹ Newbigin 1995a: 10.

¹⁸² Newbigin 1995a: 10. Cf. also, 1991f: 2; 1995a: 10.

¹⁸³ Newbigin 1991b: 7.

¹⁸⁴ Newbigin 1991f: 2. Cf. also, 1988g: 152; 1989f: 222; 1991a: 2; 1991f: 2 (x2); 1991b: 7.

‘public truth’ to which we will shortly return.

Summary

From the foregoing analysis, it becomes apparent that Newbigin uses the phrase ‘public truth’ in a variety of interrelated, but distinct, ways – and with differing audiences in mind.¹⁸⁵ In this context we have distinguished three different patterns of use which have been described as ‘epistemological’, ‘dialogical’ and ‘foundational’.

Two comments are in order. Firstly, analysis of the ‘grounds’ on which he appeals to these different audiences reveals interesting insights. On the one hand his appeal to the Church functions unsurprisingly on the basis of warrants that are grounded in the authority of revelation. Similarly, his appeal for ‘dialogue’ takes revealed truth as the basis for such conversation. On the other hand his more general defence of the view that Christian faith is to be seen to be on a par with scientific ‘truth’ – at least in a culture which has understood the true nature of ‘knowing’ – assumes an appeal to a common, wider, rationality than one based entirely or exclusively upon the presuppositions of Christian faith.

Secondly, it is when we move to a comparison between his second and third categories (‘dialogical’ and ‘foundational’) that there emerges a deeper

¹⁸⁵ The three categories ‘epistemological’, ‘dialogical’ and ‘foundational’ cover 100 of the total of 126 occurrences of the phrase ‘public truth’ in Newbigin’s writings. Of the remaining twenty-six uses, eleven refer to particular (put less precise) dimensions of the ‘dialogical’ category (either as distinguishing ‘publicness’ from an implied ‘return to Christendom’, cf. 1988c: 170; 1992b: 1, 2; 1992e: 1 (x2); 1997d: 1; or as distinguishing the meaning of the phrase from one that suggests that its ‘publicness’ cannot be contested, cf. 1987d: 131; 1988g: 151 (x4)). The remaining fifteen occur in contexts that are either introductory to more specific discussions (1988g: 151; 1988e: 106; 1989g: 6; 1989f: 223; 1991f: 1; 1992b: 1 (x2); 1995d: 47), or are altogether more generalised (1988g: 152; 1989g: 11; 1991a: 1 (x2); 1991d: 2; 1992k: 24; 1993g: 254; 1998: 162).

tension in Newbigin's material. This appears in our juxtaposition of his 'dialogical' and 'foundational' categories. For if the conception of 'dialogue' entails an understanding of 'public' that simply refers to the operating sphere in which Christian dialogue with others is to take place, the more 'foundational' expressions in Newbigin's material appear to contradict this. In this sense the 'public' truth of the gospel is a 'given': the *a priori* upon which alone true knowledge is possible. In this context, the connotation of the word 'public' is to be sharply distinguished from both 'epistemological' and 'dialogical' uses. There a wider rationality was assumed: here, revelation is essential.

(ii) *The role of 'dogma'*

We have identified the potential conflict between Newbigin's advocacy of a 'confessional' approach to the foundations of cultural renewal, and his appeal to a wider rationality which need not accept such a starting point. We shall now take the discussion forward by returning to our examination of *The Other Side of 1984* in an attempt to trace the 'fault-line' of this tension. We shall argue that this derives once more from Newbigin's appropriation of Polanyi's framework, and more specifically that it arises from the way in which Newbigin 'overlays' Polanyi's thought with a very explicit understanding of 'revelation' that is foreign to Polanyi's scheme.

The key point in this context is to compare the way in which Newbigin and Polanyi use the term 'dogma'. In order to develop this point, we shall return to our discussion of Newbigin's statement in *The Other Side of 1984* that the

‘new start’ he is advocating for Western culture involves what he describes as ‘an invitation to recover a proper acknowledgment of the role of dogma.’¹⁸⁶

In the light of the foregoing analysis, this statement inevitably lends itself to a measure of potential ambiguity. Does it imply – as some of his critics have argued – that Newbigin’s contention that the gospel is ‘public truth’ involves a necessary return to a kind of Constantinian State in which Christianity is the dominating ideology?¹⁸⁷ Newbigin himself is repeatedly careful to reject such a conclusion. He argues that what he means by ‘dogma’ in the ‘public’ arena is not that the Christian faith should provide the *necessary* foundation for all social activity. This would imply that the State – thus founded – would be obliged to repress every view to the contrary. Rather, Newbigin explains that what he means is something rather more modest. It is that the Church (the ‘community entrusted with a “fiduciary framework”’ supplied by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ¹⁸⁸) must now engage in a necessary dialogue with other ‘fiduciary frameworks’ that are in competition in the public sphere. What Newbigin’s project aims to establish, therefore, is a recognition in the public arena of the fact that what Polanyi says about knowledge is fundamentally correct: that *all* knowledge is held a-critically, and that it includes an inescapable element of ‘faith’. As a consequence of this, Christians – no less than others – should not be ashamed that they hold their beliefs in this way.

So far, these ideas are essentially in agreement with those of Polanyi. But Newbigin’s thought, whilst indebted to Polanyi’s basic insights, now takes a crucial turn in the way in which he understands the word ‘dogma’. At a

¹⁸⁶ Newbigin 1983b: 27.

¹⁸⁷ E.g., Graham and Walton 1991: 5; Stowe 1988: 199.

¹⁸⁸ Newbigin 1983b: 31.

superficial level, both Newbigin and Polanyi appear to use both the noun ‘dogma’ and the adjective ‘dogmatic’ in similar ways. For example, Newbigin’s own use of the noun in the quotation above comes in the course of a lengthy passage in which Polanyi’s thought-world is prominent.¹⁸⁹ He also quotes the latter’s reference to the advantages of ‘dogmatic orthodoxy’¹⁹⁰ from a passage in *Personal Knowledge* in which Polanyi describes the grounds of his ‘post-critical philosophy’ as – in a foundational respect – ‘an invitation to dogmatism’.¹⁹¹ Furthermore, both writers at this juncture accord a positive sense to the notion of ‘dogma’.¹⁹² But it is important to note, nonetheless, that Newbigin’s usage invests Polanyi’s concept with additional meaning.

The crucial difference is that whereas Polanyi uses the concept of ‘dogma’ in an essentially *non*-religious context, Newbigin not only brings it into the religious sphere, but invests it with specifically Christian, and even ‘confessional’ content. The suggestion that Polanyi is *not* doing this may appear to be a somewhat surprising observation given his frequent references to Augustine as the quintessential paradigm for his own proposals. The reader may naturally assume therefore that Polanyi is talking in religious terms, and that Newbigin’s use of his ideas is strictly parallel. Yet a closer reading of Polanyi reveals that this is not the case. True, Augustine functions for him as the ‘model’ epistemologist because of the fiduciary element that is integral to his concept of knowledge, but the word ‘fiduciary’ in this context is not applied specifically by

¹⁸⁹ Newbigin 1983b: 20-30, in which Newbigin develops some basic Polanyian insights, quoting him at length five times, and referring to him by name eight times.

¹⁹⁰ Newbigin 1983b: 25-6.

¹⁹¹ Polanyi 1958: 268.

¹⁹² E.g., Polanyi 1966: 83. For Polanyi, ‘dogma’ in this sense carries the positive connotation of the free use of fiduciary exploration in contrast to its opposite: an imposition of authority from outside. For the dangers of the latter, cf. Polanyi 1964: 59, or 1969: 26-7.

Polanyi to Christian faith *as such*, but to the epistemological exercise of ‘faith’ in more general terms. It functions for Polanyi in a strictly analogous fashion therefore to his understanding of ‘a-critical’ knowing and connotes the fiduciary content of *all* knowing. As a result, Augustine’s epistemology represents for Polanyi the way that proper thinking is to function, because at its heart is the exercise of ‘faith’, which – for Augustine – just happens to be Christian faith. Even Augustine’s phrase *nisi credideritis, non intelligitis* (‘unless you believe, you will not understand’) is quoted by Polanyi not so much as a way of advocating his specifically Christian faith, but as an example of the proper and appropriate character of epistemology in more *general* terms.¹⁹³ Understood in this way, Augustine becomes for Polanyi a model of properly ‘a-critical’ thinking, and therefore of ‘post-critical’ philosophy. As a result, Polanyi is not setting out to mount a defence of Christian epistemology in particular (and by no means has he in mind the defence of some form of ‘Constantinianism’).

Newbigin, however, adopts Polanyi’s basic framework but now sets it in a rather different context. For him, the references to the Augustinian synthesis of ‘faith’ and ‘knowledge’ are meant to be taken much more fully and specifically as an affirmation of their implied *Christian* content.¹⁹⁴ Note for example in the

¹⁹³ E.g., Polanyi 1958: 266.

¹⁹⁴ E.g., Newbigin 1983b: 63; 1986b: 102ff., 133; 1991f: 1ff.. Newbigin is fond of attributing the phrase *credo ut intelligam* to Augustine (e.g., 1986b: 102; 1988c: 161; 1993b: 340; 1994d: 61; 1996c: 3). However, to my knowledge the phrase does not occur in Augustine’s writings, but was made famous much later by Anselm of Canterbury (to whom Newbigin rightly attributes it in 1966: 84, and 1989g: 4). Newbigin’s first mistaken attribution of the phrase to Augustine is in 1986b: 102 where he cites Polanyi 1958: 266ff.. Polanyi, however, never quotes Augustine to this effect, preferring instead to quote his genuine statement *nisi credideritis, non intelligitis* (cf. 1958: 266, 267; and 1966: 61 – from Augustine’s *De libero arbitrio*, Bk. 1 para. 4). The actual phrase *credo ut intelligam* comes from the conclusion of chapter 1 of Anselm’s *Proslogion* (*Neque enim quaero intelligere ut credam, sed credo ut intelligam. Nam et hoc credo: quia ‘nisi credidero, non intelligam’* – ‘For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand. For I believe even this: that “unless I believe, I shall not understand”’). The quotation is from Augustine’s translation of Isaiah 7:9.

passage of *The Other Side of 1984* quoted above the way in which Polanyi's use of the Augustinian synthesis is transposed by Newbigin into a different (now specifically 'Christian') framework of understanding. Here Newbigin offers his own interpretation of Augustine's relevance (still couched, however, in Polanyian terms). He writes accordingly that:

What Augustine offered was a 'post-critical philosophy' in the sense that it began with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and claimed that the acceptance by faith of this revelation provided the starting point for the endless enterprise of understanding. The revelation furnished a new framework for grasping and coping with experience.¹⁹⁵

As a consequence of this 'transference', the use of Polanyi's word 'dogma' by Newbigin is set within a new 'confessional' framework which is alien to Polanyi's original framework.¹⁹⁶

We have been arguing hitherto that Polanyi's framework hinders Newbigin from developing a coherent apologetic strategy in the individual sphere, and here we find the corollary of this in the 'public' realm. The difference between Polanyi and Newbigin at this level is centred not least upon their respective goals. In Polanyi's framework, on the one hand, there is a genuine openness to a wide range of possible future 'integrations' and fresh 'truths' which will inevitably emerge from a common commitment to the potentialities of 'fiduciary knowing'. These possibilities are not 'boundaried' in the sense that they are being restricted by Polanyi to a particular 'confessional'

¹⁹⁵ Newbigin 1983b: 24.

¹⁹⁶ See e.g., Newbigin 1988c: 162; 1989f: 5ff., 12; 1990q: 2; 1991f: 76ff., esp. 79: 'The Church must affirm the truth of the gospel, the fact of the sovereignty of Christ as sole Lord and Savior; and the Trinitarian faith, the given starting point, the dogma which must shape all our thinking and revising. To affirm this in season and out of season, whether they hear or refuse to hear; . . .'; also, 1993b: 347; 1995c: 154.

system, but are given a much greater measure of freedom within a more generally ‘libertarian’ field.

For Newbigin on the other hand, the scope of the epistemological project is not as ‘open’. He takes over the Polanyian notions of ‘discovery’ and ‘intuition’ but undergirds them with the much tighter epistemological presupposition of *Christian* faith. Moreover, the manner in which this is developed emphasises the exclusivity of revelation as the *a priori* of faith.¹⁹⁷ As a result, a ‘confessional’ framework forms the necessary starting point for the further discovery of truth and for progress in the field of knowing. Whilst therefore there is a real measure of openness in the use of the term ‘dogma’ by Polanyi, for Newbigin this is not so. For all the talk of ‘dialogue’ the objective is not as openly conceived for Newbigin, nor can it be given that the possible outcomes are necessarily limited by an outlook which ‘takes as its starting point and as its permanent criterion of truth the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ.’¹⁹⁸

4.5 Conclusions

We are now in a position to draw the various strands of this discussion together. This can be done in relation to the two central and interrelated questions that have emerged during the analysis. In the first place, to what extent

¹⁹⁷ The influence of Barth is clearest in Newbigin’s thought at this point.

¹⁹⁸ Newbigin 1989f: 87-88. Elsewhere, Newbigin uses words like ‘primary’ and ‘irreplaceable’ to describe his fiduciary starting point (1981c: 359). Cf. also 1989f: 11; 1991c: 6; 1993f: 228-9; 1995c: 85. The seriousness of his conviction about the rejection of such a ‘revelational’ starting point is expressed, for example, in the following statements: that ‘it is the responsibility of the Church to offer this new model for understanding as the basis for a radical renewal of our culture’, and that ‘without such radical renewal our culture has no future’ (1983b: 27).

– or in what sense – do Newbigin’s proposals amount to a ‘public’ theology?

And, secondly, to what extent is Newbigin’s theology consequently to be interpreted as ‘fideist’?

4.5.1 In what sense is Newbigin’s theology ‘public’?

The analysis of Newbigin’s ‘position’ can usefully be elucidated in relation to the distinctions in the differing notions of ‘public’ theology made by William Placher in a 1985 article entitled, ‘Revisionist and Postliberal Theologies and the Public Character of Theology’.¹⁹⁹ Here he notes that the understanding of ‘public’ theology can be viewed in two different ways. Firstly, theology can be understood as ‘public’ in the sense that it ‘appeals to warrants available to any intelligent, reasonable, responsible person’. On the other hand, theology can be understood as ‘public’ in a second sense which, whilst denying the existence of any common ground between faith and unbelief, nonetheless ‘understands [it] as fundamentally a public, communal activity, not a matter of the individual’s experience.’²⁰⁰

Placher associates the ‘revisionist’ theology of David Tracy and the ‘Chicago’ school with the first position, arguing that it ‘views with suspicion the appeal to warrants available only to Christians.’²⁰¹ In this context, ‘common’ grounds must be established for any possible dialogue between theology and social life. Tracy argues therefore that: ‘The theologian should argue the case (pro or con) on strictly public grounds that are open to all rational persons’,²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Placher 1985. Cf. also Placher 1989: 154-74.

²⁰⁰ Placher 1985: 407.

²⁰¹ Placher 1985: 407.

²⁰² E.g., Tracy 1981a: 64.

and defends the view that: ‘Personal faith or beliefs may not serve as warrants or support for publicly defended claims to truth.’²⁰³ As a consequence of statements such as these, Placher views the ‘revisionist’ theology of the Chicago School as ‘fully “public” in the first sense.’²⁰⁴ It sets out to make its apologetic appeal upon grounds of legitimation that are fully ‘public’ in the sense that they are open and potentially accessible to all – believer and sceptic alike.

The alternative approach, suggests Placher, is represented by the ‘postliberal’ theology of the ‘Yale’ school – exemplified by Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. Its theology is understood to be ‘public’ in the sense that it represents the outworking of a living tradition in the ‘public’ (as opposed to ‘private’) realm of everyday affairs. But it repudiates the ‘publicness’ of the Chicago School in that it does not seek to *engage* other points of view on grounds either of a supposed common rationality, or on the basis of any other supposed form of external warrant. As Placher puts it, ‘for the postliberal neither doctrine nor Scripture functions to express some universal dimension of experience against which it can be measured.’²⁰⁵ Placher proceeds to argue that this does not necessarily amount to a ‘Wittgensteinian’ form of ‘fideism’, in which belief in a radical incommensurability prevents dialogue with other traditions, or in which each tradition can only ‘be understood and justified *solely* in terms of the form of life of which it is a part.’²⁰⁶ However, our analysis in chapter 1 led to the conclusion that in the case of ‘postliberals’ like George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas, this does in fact tend to be the case. As a result, both writers are more

²⁰³ E.g., Tracy and Cobb 1983: 9.

²⁰⁴ Placher 1985: 408.

²⁰⁵ Placher 1985: 408.

²⁰⁶ Placher 1985: 408 (emphasis added).

internally focussed upon the authenticity of the Christian community itself, than externally concerned about the possible engagement of its truth-claims with outsiders.

On the basis of Placher's distinction, our analysis of Newbigin's 'public truth' material has shown that he is problematically caught between these two conceptions of the term 'public'. The weight of Newbigin's arguments militate against the view that his position could be considered 'public' in a 'revisionist' sense. His repeated dismissal of the so-called neutral 'Archimedean' vantage point, along with his firm alliance with Polanyi in rejecting the Enlightenment's foundationalist elevation of reason, along with his increasing unease with the notion of 'natural theology' would serve to confirm this conclusion.

In addition, it is hard to resist the conclusion that the only specific 'warrant' or 'foundation' for 'publicly defended claims to truth' apparent within Newbigin's writings is ultimately that of 'personal faith': either expressed as being legitimated 'in the name of Jesus',²⁰⁷ or on the basis of a personal call from God to 'bear witness'.²⁰⁸ At these points therefore, Newbigin shows himself to be positioned squarely within Placher's 'Yale' camp.

The meaning of the word 'public' in this context is that Christianity is indeed to be lived out in the 'public' square, but its 'publicness' does not entail a commitment to external legitimating warrants on the basis of which rival views can be critiqued. Inherent within this is the agreement with Berger's reaction against the 'privatising' tendency of Christianity under modernity²⁰⁹ but also an acknowledgement – in agreement with MacIntyre, Frei and Lindbeck – that with

²⁰⁷ E.g., Newbigin 1977c: 214; 1978b: 16, 20ff.. (also 1995c: 15, 19, 28); 1989f: 6; 1993a: 96.

²⁰⁸ E.g., Newbigin 1978b: 17 (also 1995c: 15); 1989f: 61-2; 1993f: 237; 1995c: 15, etc..

²⁰⁹ E.g., Newbigin 1986b: 145; 1987a: 368; 1988d: 41; 1989g: 11.

the passing of modernity, traditions can only speak out of their own narrative histories, without the recourse to the kinds of external warrants that modernity seemed to offer. However, our analysis has also shown that there are other occasions in which the meaning Newbigin attaches to the phrase ‘public truth’ appears to depart from the apologetic confines of a pure ‘narrativism’ and suggests that he is rather more in sympathy with the more robustly engaging ‘publicness’ associated with the Chicago school than his own stated presuppositions would allow.

The question that persists in relation to Newbigin’s work therefore is whether his sympathy with the ‘narrative’ approaches of Frei and Lindbeck can ever escape the apologetic limitations of the ‘self-descriptive’ style that narrative theology tends to favour. Can it ever be anything other than the re-telling of the Christian story amongst other stories without recourse to external warrants or legitimations? Our analysis has shown that Newbigin’s dogmatic assumptions and methodology suggest that it cannot. Inasmuch as his apologetic can be shown to engage with other viewpoints, we have seen that it does so only with a future orientation whose ‘proof’ is eschatologically revealed, rather than presently manifested. Echoes of a more ‘modernist’ view of legitimation at various points in his work therefore betray a critical confusion at the heart of Newbigin’s material, as a result of which we are never left entirely clear what he means by ‘public’.

4.5.2 In what sense is Newbigin’s theology ‘fideist’?

As with the distinctions necessary for an understanding of how the epithet ‘public’ is to be understood in relation to Newbigin’s work, further definition

must also be given to the related concept of 'fideism'. In this context Terrence Tilley's article 'Incommensurability, Intratextuality, and Fideism'²¹⁰ provides a helpful framework within which we may now approach the question of Newbigin's 'positioning'. Like Placher, Tilley develops the discussion with reference to both 'revisionist' and 'post-liberal' perspectives represented by the 'Chicago' and 'Yale' schools.²¹¹ In a similar manner to Placher, Tilley argues that the 'Yale' school's

. . . refusal to find an extra-textual foundation for, or provide a 'reasonable' prolegomenon to, theology has led revisionist and liberal theologians to accuse the post-liberals of fideism. Such a charge seems to presume that all non-foundationalist theologies must be fideistic simply because they reject 'foundationalism'. Given this presumption, any 'intratextual' approach is fideistic.²¹²

Tilley explores this assumption, and concludes by making a distinction between what he terms a 'foundationalist fideism' on the one hand, and a 'relativist fideism' on the other. The first approach is presented as an alternative foundationalism to that of 'classic theological rationalism', and Tilley argues that it provides a similar response to the sceptic who attacks the rationality of theological or religious discourse.²¹³ He continues:

Classic fideists agree with the formal strategy of classic rationalists: both respond to skepticism by constructing a foundation. They differ both in the materials they use to construct their foundations and in whether people get access to that foundation basically through reason or faith.²¹⁴

²¹⁰ Tilley 1989.

²¹¹ I have followed Tilley's spelling of 'post-liberal' in the present discussion (as opposed to Placher's 'postliberal').

²¹² Tilley 1989: 87.

²¹³ Tilley 1989: 88: 'Foundationalist fideism . . . attempts to provide a foundation for theology in divine revelation or the gift of faith.'

²¹⁴ Tilley 1989: 88.

As a result, he argues that, ‘What we usually call “fideism” would better be labelled faith-foundationalism; what we usually call “foundationalism” or “rationalism” is more properly called reason-foundationalism.’²¹⁵ In other words, the nature of the foundation may differ in each case, but both *adopt* a foundation and articulate the means by which such foundations are accessible (by faith or by reason).

In contrast to this ‘faith-foundationalist’ form of fideism is the more radical form adopted by ‘post-liberals’: an approach that Tilley describes as ‘relativist fideism’. ‘As faith-foundationalists are fideistic in a foundationalist epistemological context, so faith-relativists are fideistic in a relativist context. Relativist fideists refuse to agree even to engage in conversation with those who don’t accept their faith commitments.’²¹⁶ Here, the assumptions made by post-liberals are ‘anti-foundationalist’ in the sense that they reject both ‘faith’ and ‘reason’ forms of foundationalism, arguing that the grounds for either imply that there is an agreement about the foundations upon which an argument about ‘difference’ can take place. By contrast, post-liberals recognize that ‘acceptance and belief come before questioning and doubt’, and that therefore there is a self-referentiality to the tradition out of which they speak.²¹⁷

Thus two distinct forms of fideism are identified by Tilley, to be distinguished on the one hand by the foundationalist or non-foundationalist assumptions that they adopt, and on the other by the degree to which the views

²¹⁵ Tilley 1989: 88.

²¹⁶ Tilley 1989: 88.

²¹⁷ Tilley 1989: 88.

thus founded are considered to be commensurable with the positions of others who disagree with them.²¹⁸

In drawing conclusions about Newbigin's 'fideism', it is certainly the case that Newbigin himself repeatedly rejects the label on the basis that he considers it to be an inappropriate way of describing his position.²¹⁹ Moreover, the logic of his Polanyian premises leads him to the view that actually *all* viewpoints are to a degree 'fideistic' in the sense that all are founded upon faith-commitments – whether these are spoken or not.²²⁰ In addition, we have shown that his repeated advocacy of the need for 'dialogue' is itself constructed precisely in order to counteract what he sees as the more radical forms of 'relativist fideism' – positions which do not allow either criticism or argument. Given our conclusions about the basis upon which such debate may be seen to take place, one must conclude that Newbigin is to be positioned within Tilley's 'faith-foundationalist' category; in other words, that he cannot ultimately escape the fideist charge but that his fideism is of the 'foundationalist' rather than the 'relativist' variety.

In conclusion therefore, there remains a critical tension in the concept of 'public truth' – along with its 'fideist' implications – as used in Newbigin's writings. At one level, this might be interpreted as a tension between 'postmodern' and 'modern' perspectives in which the acknowledgement that Christianity must now appeal from within the rationality of its own narrative sits in tension with a lingering sympathy for the availability of some form of external

²¹⁸ Plantinga (1983) constructs a similar distinction between 'moderate' and 'extreme' fideism. Plantinga refers to his own position as within the former category (89-91).

²¹⁹ See, for example, the discussions in Newbigin 1991f: 28-30; 1992k: 22; 1993b: 348-9; 1993f: 236; 1994d: 69-70; 1996c: 20ff..

²²⁰ In this sense his defence against the charge ends up by subverting it! E.g., his rebuttal of the critique along these lines in 1996c: 20-21.

warrant characteristic of an older cultural worldview. But we have shown that the dilemma is deeper than this. As with other central concerns within Newbigin's writings, we have concluded that the major component in the confusion at the heart of his 'public truth' agenda is the importation of Polanyi's notion of 'dogma' into the equation.

Once more therefore, we can defend the argument that Newbigin's framework owes rather too much to Polanyi than is beneficial. For in addition to the fact that he consistently adopts Polanyi's language and thought-forms to express his own approach to epistemology, he now overlays these with a Polanyian notion of 'dogma' which he reinterprets in terms of a revelational *a priori*.

This importation serves severely to limit Newbigin's options. In the first place, it makes it very difficult for him to articulate a form of apologetic that he is obliged to develop if he is to be true to his desire to appeal to a wider culture. But secondly, his insistence both that 'dogma' should function as the foundation for a 'new cultural starting point' and that this 'dogma' is by its very nature acknowledgeable only on the basis of faith, represents a problematic foundation for contemporary public life. This is particularly the case when it is recognised that the machinery and ministrations of our political and social institutions is largely (and increasingly) exercised without reference to any kind of Christian belief at all.

Moreover, in adopting this position, Newbigin is insistent that he repudiates both a 'modernist' perception of 'public' truth on the one hand, and a return to an older form 'Christendom' on the other. It is difficult to determine where this material leaves him other than in some other form of contemporary 'theocracy' whose presuppositional basis is firmly rooted in the directive authority of divine 'revelation'. For what else could the fabric of a 'renewed' culture look like if the Church *were* to be successful in fulfilling her obligation to 'offer this new model'

(the acknowledgement by faith of the dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation as the foundation for knowing) ‘as the basis for a radical renewal of our culture’?²²¹

Newbigin himself comes closest to accepting this sort of theocratic conclusion in a 1995 public lecture at King’s College, London entitled ‘Can a Modern Society be Christian?’²²² in which he outlines in skeletal form the dimensions of a form of benign theocracy where both dissent is allowed and dialogue is encouraged. Though the lecture does not give room for a sustained development of these ideas, his attempt to distinguish this form of theocracy from what might be considered to be a ‘Christianised’ form of an Islamic state remains undeveloped and inherently problematic – not least in terms of how questions of public dissent would be handled.²²³ One can only conclude that in the current climate, the implications of such a theocratic vision – with its likely connotations in the public mind of both fundamentalism and militancy – remain somewhat troubling as the proffered foundations for public life.

²²¹ Newbigin 1983b: 27.

²²² Newbigin 1995a.

²²³ See the brief discussion at various points in the lecture (Newbigin 1995a: *passim*). One suspects that though Newbigin understandably advocates Christian truth over against Islam as the only true foundation for society, he has an ongoing sympathy for Muslims in their attempt to counter the secularism of liberal democracies at the political level, and in their refusal to allow personal faith to become privatised (cf. e.g.: 1985d: 33: ‘I think that the Muslim community in Britain will have an important role in questioning the assumptions of our society on the basis of a living faith in God’; 1990j: 1: ‘Christians must welcome the challenge which Muslims bring to our belief system and begin to recognize how much dogma is built into our accepted public doctrine’; 1991b: 8: ‘the Muslim challenge will compel Christians to question the privatization of their faith and . . . the idea that public life is an arena from which the truth-claims of the gospel are excluded’).

Conclusion

Retrospect and Prospect

5.1 Introduction

We are now in a position to draw the threads of the thesis together and suggest both implications and possibilities. We noted at the outset that the cultural context in which Newbigin wrote following his return from India in 1974 has been characterised by the cultural transition from ‘modernity’ to ‘postmodernity’. Yet it is neither clear that such a transition is complete, nor is it clear what are the directions in which such a transition may be leading. The conclusions of Middleton and Walsh still appear to hold good six years on, that whilst there is a general agreement that ‘modernity is bankrupt, it is not at all clear that it has been superseded or replaced.’ They continue: ‘We live in a time of cultural transition, where we are experiencing the continuance – even the heightening – of central features of modernity, side-by-side with genuinely novel, postmodern elements.’¹ This analysis makes the tasks of mission and apologetics more challenging, but it also means that the assessment of a writer like Newbigin needs to take into account the multi-dimensional nature of the transition so far as the continuing value of his contribution to the task of mission is concerned.

¹ Middleton and Walsh 1995b: 41.

In part one of this final chapter, therefore, we will develop conclusions about Newbigin's contribution in the context of cultural change, synthesising and developing the conclusions reached in the course of the foregoing chapters. Then in part two, we shall conclude the thesis by suggesting some lines upon which missiological reflection is now needed in the light of Newbigin's contribution.

5.2 Retrospect: Summary of thesis

The central argument of the thesis has been that Newbigin's missiology cannot be adequately understood without an appreciation of the extent of his debt to the thinking of Michael Polanyi. Though reference has frequently been made to Polanyi's influence by other scholars, the thesis has sought to offer the fullest examination of this influence so far, constructing both a reappraisal of Newbigin's thought in the light of this influence, as well as drawing the implications that arise from it. The heart of this argument was put forward in chapter 2, where our analysis concluded that Polanyi's book *Personal Knowledge* has critically influenced Newbigin's thinking in three ways.

Firstly, in terms of cultural analysis, it was argued that during the mid to late-seventies Newbigin adopted Polanyi's diagnosis that the Enlightenment movement was itself on the point of exhaustion, and that a new starting point for the renewal of Western culture was now urgently required. As a result of this, we argued that a central element of Newbigin's programme is his transfer of Polanyi's epistemological correlates of cultural crisis and cultural opportunity into a missiological context. Secondly, Polanyi's approach to epistemology – which had originally been incorporated into Newbigin's thinking in the mid-

1960s – was now taken up with renewed vigour from the late seventies as a central constituent of Newbigin’s fresh engagement with the culture of ‘modernity’ and had resulted in a more ‘aggressive’ apologetic strategy in relation to the supposed pre-eminence of Enlightenment reason. Thirdly, we argued that it is not simply in the ‘deconstructive’ dimensions of Polanyi’s thought that Newbigin’s debt to him is to be identified. It is also clearly evident in the reconstruction of Newbigin’s missionary programme, which is best understood as the transposition of Polanyi’s framework into a theological and ecclesiological context.

We have further argued that the examination of Newbigin’s programme within this ‘Polanyian’ framework reveals both strengths and weaknesses within his overall approach to mission strategy, whilst at the same time bringing to light hitherto unexplored aspects of his contribution to missiology – not least in the context of the cultural transition to postmodernity. In what follows, we will summarise the effects and implications of this indebtedness in relation to the three critical points of Polanyi’s influence referred to above: the interpretation of the cultural ‘turning point’, the critique of Enlightenment reason, and the resulting reconstruction of missiology.

5.2.1 The cultural ‘turning point’

From the point of view of missiological and cultural analysis it can be argued that Newbigin’s adoption of Polanyi’s cultural diagnosis helped to establish him as one of the first missiologists to identify and describe the crisis of modernity to which the Church in the West had to respond if she was to come to terms with the implications of its demise. Newbigin’s discovery of Polanyi’s

cultural diagnosis coincided with his own sense of ‘culture shock’ as a returning missionary, enabling him to grasp in a fresh and vital way a framework within which to approach the question of mission to the West. In this sense Newbigin the missiologist should be given credit for his anticipation of many of the central themes within the wider philosophical and cultural critique of ‘modernity’. For example, Bauman’s ‘summing up’ of one of the major elements within the ‘postmodern’ critique could be a description of Newbigin’s own material: ‘It is the modern artifice that has been dismantled; the modern conceit of meaning-legislating reason that has been exposed, condemned and put to shame. It is that artifice and that reason, the reason of the artifice, that stands accused in the court of postmodernity.’²

The ‘freshness’ of Newbigin’s analysis so far as the churches were concerned is clear for example from the initial responses to the publication of *The Other Side of 1984* in the mid-eighties. Newbigin himself was taken aback by the response. He wrote in his autobiography:

The BCC’s publishing department thought that it would be risky to print more than 500 copies, but it was taken up by the World Council of Churches and quickly sold 20,000. I was quite astonished at the volume and range of correspondence that descended on me. Clearly the questions had touched a nerve, even if answers were still to be found. I was moved by letters from lay people who told me that it had illuminated their situation. A lawyer told me that he felt as if the sun had risen and he could see the landscape.³

He added: ‘Ever since then I have puzzled about the fact that such a brief, hastily written paper could have such a reception’.⁴ Elsewhere, he described the

² Bauman 1992: x.

³ Newbigin 1993g: 252.

⁴ Newbigin 1993g: 253.

book as ‘a small blast not of the trumpet but of the tin whistle’,⁵ and insisted that it ‘contained nothing new or revolutionary’.⁶

However, in a collection of responses published in the *Journal of the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham*, one reviewer commented that it was a book whose ‘cultural analysis, diagnosis, and prescription’ came across as ‘bold and breathtaking in its scope’,⁷ whilst another, Dan Beeby, stated significantly that this was a critique that Newbigin ‘perhaps . . . helped start’, adding:

. . . he has formulated clearly some of the questions which have hovered over many minds. Straws in the wind have been brought into one compact rick. He has systematized for many of us the gropings and half answers that were already ours and we are grateful.⁸

Beeby later commented in a ‘tribute’ to Newbigin that although Newbigin himself did not feel that he had said anything ‘new’ in the book, others ‘disagreed strongly’ with this estimate.⁹

Newbigin was clearly surprised by the overwhelmingly positive nature of the response, and later acknowledged that its impetus was instrumental in ‘pitchforking’ him into ‘thinking further about this subject.’¹⁰ If Newbigin’s analysis in this regard has by now become well-known and oft-repeated, the force of its initial impact upon the Church should not be forgotten in any analysis of his achievement.

As part of our own analysis moreover, a major conclusion of the thesis has been that Newbigin’s indebtedness to Polanyi has the effect not only of

⁵ Newbigin 1994b: 69.

⁶ Newbigin 1993g: 256.

⁷ Felderhof 1985: 17.

⁸ Beeby 1985: 13.

⁹ Beeby 1998: 9.

¹⁰ Newbigin 1992k: 22.

bringing him into line with central postmodern ‘critiques’ of modernity, but of establishing the contemporary relevance of its conclusions. For though mounted primarily as a response to the ‘modernist’ challenge, the effects of Polanyi’s thought upon Newbigin’s reconstruction have helped to establish the credentials of his missiology as viably ‘postmodern’ in its own right. Whilst the value of Polanyi’s ‘subjective’/‘objective’ apologetic may have lost some of its ‘edge’ in a more postmodern milieu, the dimensions of Polanyi’s thought which anticipated the postmodern ‘turn’ may in Newbigin’s thought now be said to have come into their own. Amongst these we have numbered Polanyi’s adherence to the late-Wittgensteinian notion of the communal ‘rationality of traditions’, and the embeddedness of language within such traditions, along with the resulting conclusions about the ‘incommensurability’ of their rival claims to truth.

If the adoption of these theoretical constructs means on the one hand that Newbigin ends up by adopting a ‘fideistic’ position in relation to the construction of apologetics, it nonetheless means that his missiology carries the necessary qualifications to be taken seriously in a postmodern milieu. Indeed, an important conclusion of the thesis has been that his work not only ‘anticipated’ some of the major ‘postmodern’ questions before these were seriously being addressed by other missiologists, but that it had already begun to articulate ecclesial and apologetic responses to them. Amongst these, we have noted his insistence that to bear witness to the gospel is to speak out of a ‘tradition’, that to do so involves the obligation to allow the tradition to sustain its own viability without recourse to exterior warrants, and that such viability is inextricably tied to the authenticity of the community ‘carrying’ and bearing witness to such traditions. Newbigin’s resulting missiology can therefore be said not only to maintain a place of

importance for reflection and study in the context of cultural change, but also to contribute much that is of value in such a context. As yet, very little attention has been paid to this aspect of Newbigin's work.¹¹ Indeed, if Newbigin's missiology has reason to be taken seriously, the thesis has established that its merits in the milieu of postmodernity are as great if not greater than was the case under modernity.

But alongside the more positive aspects that accrue from Newbigin's deployment of Polanyi's cultural diagnosis, the thesis has also drawn attention to a more negative implication that has not hitherto been explored. This arises from the way in which Polanyi's analysis of the 'crisis'/'opportunity' framework provoked by the demise of the dominant Enlightenment epistemology is transferred by Newbigin into a missiological context. Here, the thesis has shown that the adoption of Polanyi's framework has the effect of 'homogenising' the diverse cultural and ecclesiological 'factors' that Newbigin himself had – in earlier discussions of the interplay between culture and gospel – described in more 'pluralistic' dimensions. As a result of this we have argued that Newbigin's approach to contemporary cross-cultural mission in the West is characterised by some critical and unresolved tensions.

If the diagnosis of the effects of Polanyi's thought on Newbigin's theoretical approach at this level is correct, the recent study by Hunsberger needs at this point to be revised. Its sub-title ('Lesslie Newbigin's theology of cultural plurality') rightly articulates his innovative contribution to the pioneering cultural work of Niebuhr and Tillich.¹² However, Hunsberger's central conviction that

¹¹ Though see now the brief article by Hunsberger (1998c).

¹² Hunsberger 1998a: 3-44.

Newbigin's work highlights the fact that 'issues of missionary approach regarding human cultures are and must be theological; and that issues of a theological approach to human cultures must account for and respond to the inherent plurality of those multiple cultures',¹³ is not as persuasive in Newbigin's later work as Hunsberger makes out.

What has emerged from our enquiry is that although this 'plurality' is reflected in Newbigin's work as the interplay of cultural entities, these are seen to function at a theoretical and idealistic level – in which the cultural elements in the interplay are viewed increasingly as unified 'entities'. As a result his later work fails to do justice to the more variegated and diffused nature of the interplay between 'gospel' and 'culture' at the level of both cultural and ecclesiological realities.

A more nuanced – and realistic – approach to the question of 'plurality' would have to contend with the plural nature of the Church itself (not least in its more or *less* 'semiotic' relationship with Scripture) as well as with the deeply pluralised nature of Western society, if it is to provide an adequate foundation upon which to develop a contemporary missiology. This modification to the nature of the relationships in Newbigin's 'triangular' pattern of missiological reflection (what we have called its 'homogenising' tendency) has been shown by the thesis to be the result of Polanyi's over-influential epistemological framework and its consequent effects upon the 'receptor', 'missionary', and 'Bible' corners of the triangle. As a result of our findings, therefore, it is possible to conclude

¹³ Hunsberger 1998a: 7.

that Newbigin's later missiology becomes in fact less 'pluralised' in its missiological approach than some of his earlier work.¹⁴

5.2.2 The critique of Enlightenment reason

The second major area in which Polanyi's thinking has influenced Newbigin's agenda is in his adoption of Polanyi's critique of the Enlightenment's 'foundationalist' commitment to 'reason' as exemplified supremely within the natural and mathematical sciences. The thesis has drawn out the implications of this adoption in a variety of ways.

In positive terms, the critique helped Newbigin to contribute an intelligent and coherent apologetic in the face of the 'objectivist' dismissal of religious faith and the cultural 'privatisation' of religion. In the context of late modernity, this critique was especially acute, both at a philosophical and a more popularly apologetic level, attacking as it did the 'subjective'/'objective' dualism within which the Enlightenment project sought to establish the validity of certain truth claims, whilst at the same time decisively excluded others.

Moreover, in addition to the value of this critique as an apologetic device, Newbigin's work had (and continues to have) a wider impact. If one of the effects of modernity was to produce what Berger called 'a weakening of the plausibility of religious perceptions of reality' in society in general,¹⁵ the

¹⁴ In this context, Wainwright's comment (2000: 192) that 'The pattern of *The Open Secret* constituted the stable background for what Lesslie Newbigin continued to think, speak, and write on missiological matters in the 1980s and 1990s', whilst right in referring to the 'Christocentric trinitarianism' which continued to inform Newbigin's work, nonetheless (like Hunsberger's analysis) takes no cognisance of the effects of Polanyi's thought on Newbigin's theoretical framework at this level.

¹⁵ Berger 1979: 110.

inevitable knock-on effect of this was to weaken the ‘plausibility’ of the Church’s witness in the face of what was perceived to be a cultural dismissal of its ongoing validity. In this context, one of Newbigin’s greatest contributions has been to undergird Christian witness with a confidence that otherwise many believers might have lacked. At the denominational level, the emergence of Newbigin’s work in the early 1980s was influential in helping white mainline churches to recover a greater confidence in the authority of the gospel in the light of both the secular strategies of the sixties and the *Myth of God Debate* of the seventies.¹⁶

At a more personal level, the words of Marius Felderhof, written after the publication of *The Other Side of 1984*, are indicative of Newbigin’s influence upon individual believers. ‘The chief value of his book’, he wrote, ‘is to dispel the sense of insecurity or inferiority that some Christians may feel in having a faith-commitment, because he demonstrates to them that *everyone* necessarily has such faith-commitments.’¹⁷ It can be argued in this context, that Newbigin’s apologetic has continued to contribute to the task of undergirding Christian witness with a greater confidence than otherwise it might have had.

The contemporary transition to an increasingly ‘postmodern’ milieu must inevitably lead to a reassessment of the value of this particular apologetic approach in terms of the ongoing viability of its theoretical and philosophical underpinnings. For whereas modernity might have been described as more ‘monolithic’ in its central philosophical convictions, postmodernity is by its very nature more ‘diffused’, dismissing overarching ideologies, and favouring by

¹⁶ Note Ramachandra’s comment quoted in the Introduction that Newbigin’s, ‘galvanising summons to a slumbering, divided and tragically compromised church in the West invites comparison with the challenge of the early Barth’ Ramachandra 1996: 144.

¹⁷ Felderhof 1985: 20.

contrast the more localised and subjective aspects of existence. As a result, an apologetic approach which set out to subvert one of modernity's most cherished beliefs (a strategy that Polanyi himself described as 'rattling all the skeletons in the cupboard of the current scientific outlook'¹⁸) is likely to fare less well in a postmodern context in which the quest for philosophical 'objectivity' has been effectively abandoned and replaced by a 'laissez-faire' pluralism. Nonetheless, in the light of Middleton and Walsh's comment that the cultural transition is neither 'clean' nor complete, and their suggestion that many 'modernist' elements persist within the broad 'postmodern' stream, one can argue that the continuation of this kind of 'Polanyian' apologetic may still find a place – if not a pre-eminent one – alongside other strategies.

By the same token, even under modernity, Newbigin's reliance upon Polanyi's critique of reason was seen to exhibit a theoretical weakness when re-deployed in the context of apologetics. For, whilst acknowledging the benefits of its 'deconstructive' dimension, the thesis has argued that the attempt to employ at the same time the 'mirror image' of the argument (i.e., that because scientific truth is less 'objective' than commonly thought, so – correspondingly – Christian faith is more 'objective') is far less persuasive. We have argued that Polanyi's own interest in this possibility was never as committed as some of his followers have made out (or at least, that it is not committed to this possibility on the same terms – or with the same weight – as its argument about the de-throning of Enlightenment reason). Inasmuch as Polanyi *does* entertain the possibility of religious faith, it is conceived – most particularly in his last book *Meaning* – as a

¹⁸ Polanyi 1958: 18.

projection of the human imagination rather than as something that can be said to be 'rational' in the way that Enlightenment science was 'rational'.

As a result of this analysis, we have argued that the value of Polanyi's material at a strictly apologetic level is limited. It will perhaps continue – even under postmodern conditions – to be effective at moving old-style 'positivists' from an objective view of the scientific method to a more 'personalist' and 'subjective' one, but it will struggle on its own terms to influence the committed religious sceptic towards a greater degree of openness to the possible *objectivity* of religious belief.

In terms of its 'theoretical' substructure, the effects of the Polanyian critique of reason have also been shown to raise further critical questions for Newbigin's programme. In part these are due to the effects of cultural transition. If 'modernity' needed critique at the level of its philosophical reliance upon what Bauman calls the 'modern conceit of meaning-legislating reason',¹⁹ then the general agreement that the 'modern' paradigm has in critical ways been superseded leaves one asking what value is left in the 'older' critique when viewed from within the newer cultural paradigm. Whatever gains may be attributed to Newbigin's adoption of this Polanyian critique of the Enlightenment and its subsequent plea for an epistemological vision which takes seriously the fiduciary character of all knowing, the thesis has underlined the fact that the challenge remains to re-establish the validity of the Christian story in the contemporary context. Ironically, in the light of the postmodern emphasis upon 'locality', Newbigin's sustained critique of modernity's metanarrative of 'reason'

¹⁹ Bauman 1993: x.

– designed as it was to *re-establish* the legitimacy of Christian faith – can actually be said to have heightened the need for him to do so. As Philip Sampson comments:

. . . Christian critiques of modernity, in successfully uncovering the antinomies inherent in modern grand narratives, may reinforce postmodern ‘incredulity’ towards *any* grand narrative and become but another story in postmodernity’s conflicting field of stories, with no more priority than any other.²⁰

Newbigin’s central advocacy of the epistemological primacy of the biblical narrative as the locus for meaningful truth represents a bold move in its anticipatory acceptance of the narrativial framework often advocated by postmoderns. Nonetheless, we have shown that this advocacy comes with a price, for it revolves around a core tendency to polarise the modalities of ‘reason’ and ‘faith’. This polarity derives in the main from a sharply drawn contrast between the notion of ‘faith’ (conceived as religious commitment) and ‘reason’ (conceived in the ‘foundationalist’ terms of Enlightenment epistemology). Such a distinction tends to affect both the way in which each modality is viewed by Newbigin, as well as the manner in which the possibility of their interaction is discussed.

As a result, we have shown that the claims of Newbigin’s proposals – particularly in his discussions of ‘public’ truth – remain confused and finally ineffective because their appeal to the rationality of the Christian story in the public sphere is always prefaced by the need for faith in both the Trinity and the Incarnation. As a result, the two modalities are left too distantly related to each other, or are too sharply contrasted. We have argued once more that it is his

²⁰ Sampson 1994: 38. His comment is generalised, and does not relate specifically to Newbigin’s work.

following of Polanyi's framework of thought that has contributed most to this 'impasse'.

So far as Newbigin's programme itself is concerned, one might conclude that if he had openly accepted that his proposals were essentially 'fideistic' in the 'Yale' sense outlined in the previous chapter, his position would be less liable to the critique that the thesis has mounted. As it stands, however, two problems have been identified. Firstly, that Newbigin needs to demonstrate more coherently (by a more sustained development of his methodology and examples of its application) how his 'public' proposals could be defended, given that they are put forward "“with universal intent” as being a true account of reality which all people ought to accept”.²¹ Secondly, for lack of this development we are left with a confusing articulation in which Newbigin shifts his emphasis between a view of Christian truth on the one hand which appears to be 'public' simply by virtue of its ceasing to be 'private' (but which doesn't necessarily claim a public pre-eminence), or – on the other hand – of a more fundamentalist view of 'public' truth in which this 'faith-foundationalism' is not only envisaged as being true for the individual believer, but true also for the body politic as a whole.

Leaving aside for a moment this harder-line interpretation on 'public' truth outlined above, and assuming that Newbigin's 'fideism' is intended in a more moderate manner, the evaluation of Newbigin's work will ultimately depend upon the presuppositional perspectives adopted. Those who recoil from the conclusion that Newbigin's programme ends up inescapably in the 'Yale' camp of the 'post-liberals' will argue that what his method lacks is a more

²¹ Newbigin 1989f: 48.

nuanced exposition of ‘rationality’ – taking into account the different ‘modes’ within which it may be said to operate. What such an approach requires, they will argue, is a more developed articulation of how ‘faith’ is related to human rationality; and an exploration of how an understanding of this relationship might be developed in a way that need not compromise the primacy of revelation.²²

On the other hand, those who are pleased to see the demise of Enlightenment ‘foundationalism’ in its epistemological form will welcome Newbigin’s moderately-interpreted ‘faith-foundationalism’. They will argue that this was always the case, and that Newbigin has rightly drawn our attention back to the proper grounds of Christian confidence and witness which have been obscured by an over-optimistic view of Enlightenment rationalism. They may argue too that his proposals have particular relevance within a ‘postmodern’ field, because the older foundationalism has been so profoundly dismantled. If warrants are required in this newer context, they are to be found in the self-authenticating power of the gospel itself, rather than in any which are supposedly exterior and ‘neutral’.

5.2.3 The reconstruction of missiology

The third major impact of Polanyi’s thinking has been upon Newbigin’s reconstruction of missiology. The dimensions of this reconstruction can be viewed in both ecclesiological and apologetic terms.

Whilst Polanyi’s thought has been shown to have decisively influenced

²² See for example the apologetic discussions in Clark 1993; Placher 1989; van den Toren 1993; Stiver (1994 and 1995); Werpehowski 1986; or the hermeneutical work of Vanhoozer 1998a: e.g., 287-8.

Newbigin's cultural analysis and the development of an Enlightenment apologetic, the thesis has also shown that it has critically shaped his ecclesiological response. Indeed it is in the conception of the local congregation as the 'hermeneutic of the gospel' that Polanyi's thought is perhaps most constructively and creatively deployed.

Here, the thesis has established that the background to this idea lies in the fusion of Polanyi's concepts of 'tacit' knowledge and personal 'indwelling', enabling him to combine the corporate witness of the local believing community with the need for ongoing discipleship and faith. It represents perhaps Newbigin's most constructive contribution to the Church's ongoing life, creating an intrinsic and necessary connection between the concept of evangelism and witness as a 'function' of the Church's activity with the notion of witness as an integral part of a proper ecclesiological 'ontology'. Under modernity, this emphasis had value in countering the prevailing notions of witness and evangelism as individualistic concepts, or simply as the 'activity' of a fringe element of the community of faith, rather than as something in which the whole church was (and inescapably *is*) involved. Under postmodern conditions, in which terms like 'authenticity' have come to the fore by their emphasis upon the need for 'word' and 'life' to be integrated, Newbigin's synthesis continues to carry weight.

On the other hand, the thesis has also established that if Polanyi's contribution to Newbigin's thought effectively 'furnishes' it at various levels with postmodern credentials, the corollary of this in the apologetic realm is that it tends to confirm the fact that the Church's emerging witness is effectively circumscribed by its own tradition. In addition to this the imposition of Polanyi's

(and Kuhn's) notions about the limits of 'commensurability' tend further to emphasise the 'boundaried' nature of that witness.

Characteristic therefore of Newbigin's thought as it emerges in a postmodern framework is the fact that it is effectively 'locked' into that tradition, with rational commensurability working only with the benefit of post-conversion 'hindsight'. Newbigin's interaction with the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, we have argued, serves further to confirm this dimension, and reinforces the view that the genuine 'bilingualism' that is required by Newbigin in order to engage effectively with the contemporary mindset (by its need to be thoroughly 'versed' in the language of the Christian tradition *and* the language of Western culture) makes the task of apologetics very difficult, and requires a 'linguistic' skill that is rare indeed. Lindbeck's words, quoted in chapter 1 in relation to the perceived limitations of his own 'intra-textual' approach to missiology turn out to be apposite in Newbigin's case also. In speaking about inter-religious conversation, Lindbeck writes that:

. . . genuine bilingualism (not to mention mastery of many religious languages) is so rare and difficult as to leave basically intact the barrier to extramural communication posed by untranslatability in religious matters. Those for whom conversation is the key to solving interreligious problems are likely to be disappointed.²³

The fact that Lindbeck's own conclusions about the possibility of apologetics are largely negative puts the onus on Newbigin to do more than he does to surmount these methodological difficulties – particularly as his articulation of the problems and possibilities is remarkably similar at many points

²³ Lindbeck 1997: 427. He adds, 'The gravest objection to the approach we are adopting is that it makes interreligious dialogue more difficult. Conversation between religions is pluralized . . . when they are seen as mutually untranslatable' (426-7).

to that of Lindbeck. As we have argued, the effects of the transition to postmodernity are more pronounced for Newbigin in this respect than was the case under modernity. For whereas under modernity, the ‘apologetic atmosphere’ might be said to have favoured a discussion about the comparative advantages of one ‘metanarrative’ over another (with Christianity being considered on occasion as at least one ‘possibility’), the more commonly accepted conviction about the inherent ‘locality’ of narratives under postmodernity tends to heighten in Newbigin’s proposals the ‘boundaried’ nature of Christian witness. Ironically in relation to his own cause therefore Newbigin turns out to be more ‘accommodating’ to the postmodern transition than he evidently would have wished.

5.2.4 Conclusions

Our survey in this concluding chapter has been constructed around the main contention of the thesis as a whole: that Newbigin’s writings have been profoundly influenced by the cultural and philosophical work of Michael Polanyi. The degree to which this is the case contributes in our opinion both to the resulting achievements of Newbigin’s work, but also to its shortfalls. At its best, it engages and probes the cultural and missiological potential within both a modern and a postmodern milieu, provoking both agreement and further thought in equal measure. But at other points, the expectation that Newbigin is breaking into new ground is tempered in our view by the imprecision of the theoretical underpinnings on which he builds, and a consequent confusion in the terms that he espouses.

Perhaps also, Newbigin's indebtedness to Polanyi means that as a result his work *as a whole* is very difficult to categorise or systematize. It includes much cultural critique of course – mainly of modernity, but also of significant aspects of the transition to postmodernity as well. But Newbigin was never purely a cultural commentator, nor did he set out to be. He was – as he said at the outset of *Foolishness to the Greeks* – primarily a 'foreign missionary' who was setting out to ask the question, 'What would be involved in a missionary encounter between the gospel and this whole way of perceiving, thinking, and living that we call "modern Western culture"?'²⁴ Cultural analysis therefore was always for Newbigin the prolegomenon to the wider task of mission.

If one addresses the issue of whether Newbigin's contribution to missiology adds up to a coherent missionary 'programme', therefore, one is left with a sense that it is somehow 'disjointed'. There are significant dimensions to his contribution of course – as we have shown. These would include his fusing of the 'functional' and 'ontological' aspects of evangelism in the concept of the local congregation as the 'hermeneutic of the gospel'; his espousal of 'story' as the proper witness of a confessional community; and his recall of Christians to an 'indwelling' of this story as the proper foundation for mission. But these elements are not 'systematized' by Newbigin himself, nor in some cases is sufficient practical application offered within his writings which would enable a structurally formal 'programme' to be articulated. As a result, the conclusion to be drawn in our view is that Newbigin's work is not best considered as a new missiological 'programme' as such. Rather it represents a 'rallying call' to a

²⁴ Newbigin 1986b: 1.

dispirited Church to return to the gospel as the root of her confidence. If coherence is sought in the Newbigin corpus as a whole, it is at this level.

If one of the characteristics of Newbigin's work therefore is that whilst raising questions about theory and praxis, it doesn't necessarily supply definitive or systematic answers, it remains to ask where the focus of missiological thinking should be located in a 'post-Newbigin' age. It is to this question that we now turn in conclusion.

5.3 Prospect: Newbigin and the future of mission

In a 1994 article, James Davison Hunter sketched the contours of the missiological challenge raised by the previous era of 'modernity'.²⁵ 'The paradox is clear', he writes:

Christian faith is 'traditional' (that is, historically-rooted and continuous, enchanted and exclusivist) if it is anything at all; modernity is, by definition, post-traditional, secular and exclusivist. How is it possible for faith to survive against the world-disaffirming realities of modernity?²⁶

In response, he describes what he defines as three 'ideal-typical' possibilities for a community of faith in its response to such a secularised culture: 'withdrawal', 'accommodation' and 'resistance'.²⁷

By 'withdrawal', he means to indicate the kind of approach in which 'faith withdraws from any conscious interaction with the modern world', and illustrates it with reference to groups such as the Amish, or to some of the more

²⁵ Hunter 1994.

²⁶ Hunter 1994: 22.

²⁷ Hunter 1994: 22-23. See his development of this analysis in Hunter 1983: 11-19; and 1987. (Berger employs a similar categorisation in his framework of 'deductive', 'reductive' and 'inductive' responses to modernity (Berger 1980: 66-156).)

traditional and ‘closed’ Brethren denominations. On the other hand, by ‘accommodation’ he refers to the attitude in which ‘faith consciously embraces the cognitive and normative assumptions of the modern world, baptizing, as it were, the ideas and values of modern times with the waters of religious tradition.’²⁸ As a result of this ‘cognitive bargaining’,²⁹ the gospel is moulded into a construct which is often powerless to challenge the surrounding culture for the reason that is unable to maintain a proper sense of ‘otherness’. Instead, what emerges is ‘a more secular/this-worldly orientation deprived of the mysterious and supernatural.’³⁰ Finally, by ‘resistance’, Hunter refers to that reactive response in which ‘faith chooses to engage the modern world but to resist its secularizing effects in the effort to preserve its orthodoxy.’³¹ As the prime example of this he chooses the ‘fundamentalist’ movements. He develops the discussion of these responses by showing how each is the result of an intricate relationship with culture and the tradition, involving elements of ‘accommodation’ as well as ‘resistance’.

Hunter’s categorisations maintain their usefulness as a means of comparison and analysis in relation to the Church’s more contemporary challenge – not now to the ‘acids’ of modernity (to use Walter Lippmann’s phrase), but to the ‘fragmentary and the chaotic currents’ of postmodernity (to use David Harvey’s).³² The thesis has shown that this cultural transition leads to an even greater mix of possible responses, because in contrast to the *relatively* more

²⁸ Hunter 1994: 22.

²⁹ A phrase he uses elsewhere (e.g., Hunter 1983: 15) to describe this process. (It is a term borrowed – though unacknowledged – from Berger (cf. Berger 1980: 101).)

³⁰ Hunter 1994: 23.

³¹ Hunter 1994: 23.

³² Harvey 1990: 44.

steady and unified phenomenon of ‘modernity’, the inherent ‘flux’ of the postmodern context is less easy to identify – and indeed to respond to. Perhaps understandably in this context, questions of ‘presupposition’, ‘method’ and ‘philosophical approach’ become prominent in theological discussions of postmodernity as much as the more specific discussions about practical tactics and strategies, both personal and ecclesial.³³

One of the interesting points to emerge from the reappraisal of Hunter’s categories in a ‘postmodern’ context is that the characteristic of ‘withdrawal’ becomes more prominent in mainstream theological (and missiological) discussions and responses, particularly amongst those who have taken the ‘linguistic’ turn pioneered by Wittgenstein and therefore stressed the rediscovery of the ‘narrative’ dimensions of the Christian tradition.

Stanley Hauerwas’s specific defence of what amounts to a programme of ‘withdrawal’, for example, is that it represents for him the only means of maintaining and re-establishing the distinctiveness of the Christian tradition in contemporary terms. In relating this kind of response to Hunter’s other categories, such ‘withdrawal’ can be explained both as an aspect of cultural ‘accommodation’ (because of its acceptance of ‘locality’), but also at the same time as a strategy of ‘resistance’. In Hauerwas’s work, therefore, the three categories of response ‘coalesce’ in the transition to ‘postmodernity’ to a greater degree than under modernity, with the category of ‘withdrawal’ becoming more prominent.

³³ See e.g., the emphasis on ‘method’ in Phillips and Okholm 1995 (on apologetics); Dockery 1995 and Burnham 1989 (on theological method), and most recently – from an evangelical stance – Stackhouse 2000.

Hauerwas would be joined by others such as Lindbeck or Milbank in arguing that the ‘survival’ of the tradition is best served by self-description and inner strengthening, and by elements of a consequent ‘withdrawal’. Sometimes such strategies are grandiose in their aims. John Milbank’s project, for example, represents a concerted attempt to re-establish – in his words – ‘the possibility of theology as a meta discourse’.³⁴ Such a response acknowledges the fact that the Church lives on foundations that are quite separate from those that support secular society. The predication of the Christian narrative as *the* narrative into which all other narratives are now to be read is designed primarily to preserve the Christian tradition. As such it serves both as a strategy of ‘survival’ and also as one of ‘resistance’. As he puts it: ‘If my Christian perspective is persuasive, then this should be a persuasion intrinsic to the Christian *logos* itself, not the apologetic mediation of a universal human reason. . . .’³⁵

But the question that emerges from Hunter’s categorisations is whether the critique of the Enlightenment which took the narrative and linguistic ‘turn’ (pioneered by Wittgenstein and followed later by Lindbeck, Hauerwas or Milbank – and by Newbigin himself) can now be shown to be ‘public’ in the way that Newbigin himself clearly intends. Does ‘resistance’ – in Hunter’s sense of attempting ‘to engage the modern world but to resist its secularizing effects’ – necessarily involve ‘withdrawal’? This we suggest is the key question for the Church raised by the Newbigin writings.

Milbank’s recapitulation of theology as a ‘meta discourse’ is the most daring attempt to redefine the Christian tradition in a postmodern context, but is

³⁴ Milbank 1990b: 1.

³⁵ Milbank 1990b: 1.

still essentially ‘self-referential’ in the sense that its relationship to the modern world is one of ‘absorption’ rather than ‘address’. Culture is ‘read back’ into the Christian narrative rather than addressed *by* that narrative. That this may represent an attractive strategy from the viewpoint of the Christian community itself should not cloud the fact that it is a very ‘modern’ response to a postmodern dilemma. The ‘metanarrative’ lives on, and Christians are its representatives. But part of the challenge facing the Church is that her ‘narrative’ can no longer command the position of authority that it once held. As Jeffrey Stout puts it:

The time is past when theology can reign as queen of the sciences, putting each other voice in the conversation in its place and articulating, with a conviction approaching certainty, the presuppositions all share. For if all voices indeed share some presuppositions, they would not nowadays be theological. The existence of a specific sort of God is no longer taken for granted on all sides. The language spoken in the public arena, while compatible with belief in God, does not presuppose it. In that arena, a hearing for theological ideas must be won, if they are to get a hearing at all.³⁶

The thesis has demonstrated that Newbigin’s position in this context has emerged as one of tension, on the one hand appearing at times to ground the nature of public debate in a prior acceptance of certain ‘dogmas’ (thus tending like Milbank towards an ‘exclusivising’ of the theological narrative), whilst on the other insisting that this narrative is ‘public’ truth in a wider and more secularly appreciable sense. In terms of his philosophical presuppositions Newbigin aligns himself with Hauerwas and Lindbeck, whilst in terms of his theological sympathies he sides most closely Barth. But with regard to his ultimate objectives, he differs from all three. For unlike them, Newbigin’s primary aim was always to communicate the gospel to the contemporary culture. However, without the necessary articulation of *how* this strategy might be

pursued in the secular sphere on ‘public’ grounds, Newbigin’s methodology remains in danger of being viewed as a further example of ‘withdrawal’.

But need this be the case? Is this the only position tenable in a postmodern environment? Some recent voices have demurred from this conclusion. Dan Stiver refers for example to the dilemma facing Christian apologists.

For the most part religion has been on the defensive against the hegemony of science. One strategy was to make religion measure up to the standards of reason. Interestingly this was the dominant strategy of both liberalism and fundamentalism. . . . The only other strategy was to recognize that faith did not resemble reason and to concede the field of reason to philosophy and science. Since science had the prestige, the result for religion has been increasing marginalization. In the modern world, faith has been caught in an apologetic catch-22: either try to meet the standards of reason and lose its soul or preserve its soul but lose its credibility.³⁷

Perhaps it is at this point that Newbigin’s programme offers so much but delivers comparatively little. For the either/or contrast between Enlightenment reason and biblical faith that centrally characterises his work is finally unable to reformulate the relationship between the two in a way that acknowledges the changed environment of postmodernity. Attention therefore to Foucault’s comment that in a postmodern context, attention must be given to the *role* of reason rather to its dismissal is now urgently required by the Church.³⁸

³⁶ Stout 1988: 165.

³⁷ Stiver 1994: 89.

³⁸ ‘(I)f philosophy was a function within critical thought, it is precisely to accept this sort of spiral, this sort of revolving door of rationality that refers us to its necessity, to its indispensability, and at the same time, to its intrinsic dangers’ (undated interview [‘Space, Knowledge, and Power’] in Rabinow 1984: 249).

5.4 Conclusion

In conclusion then, Newbigin's work must inevitably be seen in both its positive and negative aspects. In its positive contribution, Hunsberger's comment is apt. In its revisioning of the missionary task, he writes, 'Here is a vision and perspective with the power to sustain a transforming way of life for churches of all sorts.'³⁹

If our analysis has been a 'critical' one, its criticisms have been offered in the spirit of great respect and personal admiration for a missionary theologian. Newbigin's voice has been both prophetic, and energising. God knows that the Church has needed both, and will continue to do so. But perhaps our critical appreciation of Newbigin's work *does* mean that his ongoing contribution to the Church is less as a definitive 'cultural analyst' or even as a 'programmatic missiologist'. We suggest that it will be rather as what we might term a 'missionary exemplar'. His value to the Church will not be so much in the definitiveness of the answers and insights that he contributed (though there is much in this writing that is deeply significant and suggestive). It will be rather that he sets a godly example of someone clearly and deeply motivated by the gospel who faced up to issues of pressing importance for the Church, and who was willing – even late in life – to expend his energies grappling with the profound and complex issues facing contemporary culture and Christian witness. If there are others who will take on his mantle in fresh and creative ways, his example will not have been in vain.

³⁹ Hunsberger 1998a: 278.

His visionary work therefore remains unfinished and carries within its methodology both the promise of advance but also the threat of retreat. The words of Philip Sampson – though not specifically referring to Newbigin's writings – may be used as a fitting summary both of his work, and of its prospects.

The debate over postmodernity provides an opportunity for presenting the gospel as the only foundation adequate to support the grand narratives which modernity took for granted. But to do so, we must become engaged with the world at all levels. The greatest irony would be for Christians uncritically to join the assault on a dying modernity only to find ourselves as but one story among many, unintentionally reinforcing the irrationalism of postmodernity.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Sampson 1994: 49-50.

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